

EDUCATIONAL JUSTICE IN DETROIT

Detroit has had its share of urban upheavals. Throughout those cycles, especially when many residents were left without material resources, the Society of the Sacred Heart engaged in activities to educate the underserved people of Detroit. Education as an act of justice holds true particularly when people are without jobs – and low on confidence.

Annette Zipple, RSCJ, says the educational outreach work in Detroit has been all about helping people find their voices.



Annette Zipple, RSCJ

And she points to two ground-breaking programs that have done just that: SHEP and SWEEP.

SHEP, the Sacred Heart Enrichment Program, started in 1966 at the Academy of the Sacred Heart, Grosse Pointe, as a four-week program for 7th and 8th grade girls from the inner city. The program was created to prepare students for high school, and the education comprised three elements: character development, cultural enrichment, and academics. Most important, SHEP was based on respect and designed so that each student could become aware of her personal worth.

Over the years, the SHEP creative spirit energized thousands of young girls in Detroit and inspired an amazing movement toward building bridges of communication and service to link diverse groups and communities.

Although SHEP ended in 2006, its legacy continues; and a video about the program (*Art at the Heart*, produced for SHEP by Juanita Anderson) is being screened in schools and urban centers around the country.

SWEEP, the Southwest Women's Education and Empowerment Program, was initiated in 1996 when a group of RSCJ, led by Sisters Zipple and Martha Curry, got together in a Detroit living room to determine how best to meet the educational needs of women in Southwest Detroit. A partnership with Madonna University was discussed,

a minimum number of students (twelve) was decided upon, and the first class – in the 1998-99 academic year – comprised twenty-seven students. The program has continued and grown, and the campus offers a supportive environment where students benefit from the community of fellow learners. In addition to college degree and certificate programs in social work, early childhood development, and general education, SWEEP activities include tutoring, academic advising, academic workshops, and writing assistance.

In 2004, SWEEP published a book of poems and reflections called *Women of Southwest Detroit*; the following passage describes what this kind of education can accomplish:

My life is not over, so I believe my spirit is still collecting light. It is glowing but it is not bright. It is taking on many forms and protecting my life with my memories: One of my childhood, one of my youth, one of my loves, and one of my age. In saving each one for my children, they will remember who I am and what I believed in.

— Carmen R. Romero

Sister Zipple says over fifty women have graduated from SWEEP, despite the fact that for some, a degree can take six years of commitment. "Some can only come twice a week," she says. "But they persevere. They work all day, get supper on the table, arrange for child care – and show up for class until 9:30 at night. And I see a transformation soon after they get into the process."

She says women go into the program first to get a better job. "They know they can earn more money if they have a degree," she says. "But then the children are so proud of their mothers... and the women really 'get it' about the significance of the next generation."

Thus the seeds of education are planted. Through programs like SHEP and SWEEP, children and adults discover their inherent gifts and are inspired to go further and learn more. As they do, they are better able to find both jobs – and justice. ❖