Ruth Dowd

Society of the Sacred Heart
United States – Canada

Diane Roche <droche@rscj.org>

Tue, Dec 6, 2016 at 4:18 PM

-------- Forwarded message --------
From: nancy@drnancymcmahon.com <nancy@drnancymcmahon.com>
Date: Sat, Nov 26, 2016 at 12:36 AM
Subject: RE: Request
To: Joan Gannon <jgannon@rscj.org>
Cc: "butler2951@gmail.com" <butler2951@gmail.com>

Hello Grace, I don't know if you are an RSCJ or not-- but since JG sent you to me, I am sure you are trust worthy! And I cc JG here in case you are not!

I worked for Ruth Dowd when she started Harlem Prep.... it was in 1967-68-- when she initiated the planning for it.... in

response I am sure to the Church's and the Society's call for "a preference for the poor" .- I don't think she thought of herself being "called" but just that "of course we should do this!" She was an expert in education, as well as a distinguished philosopher... she started her Harlem work by running a weekend tutorial with kids at All Saints Catholic School, and also taught a number of the Blessed Sacrament Sisters who were then running the school. This was the era of understanding that poor kids-- kids of color-- had unique skills and assets that had heretofore been overlooked by more traditional schools. People were writing books about "culturally disadvantaged" and more data were available that schools were failing poor kids.

She worked assiduously to get funding, space and staff for Harlem Prep-- a school for former high school drop outs (some would say push outs) in central Harlem. Dr. Eugene Callender then head of the Urban League in NYC worked with her-- she was key in forming a leadership team, making herself Vice President and working for the Headmaster, Ed Carpenter, an African American man who had taught in the NYC schools. His wife taught English at the school. Three other former or current RSCJs were involved- Jane Early, Liz McLaughlin and Oona Ryan (Jane is deceased; Liz a former RSCJ) and several other persons of the Bahi faith. Harlem Prep opened in an old super market building-- which had been burned out during the riots. Ruth was pretty good at pulling up the riot gates to get into the building! She successfully recruited forward thinking architects to make the school a large open area, with perches for desks, and a variety of color and movable space- very innovative.-

The idea was EVERYTHING was sold on the street in Harlem, why not education! students were generally a little older than the average high school kid, many had families, all were very low income and all had suffered from an inadequate education. The big supermarket windows allowed passers by to see the education happening inside.

The Harlem Prep philosophy was to capitalize on their individual strengths, build verbal and math power in them, build their self confidence and treat them like adults~! Ruth was highly instrumental in making college a reality for virtually all of the early graduates of Prep. Hard to believe now but at that time, virtually all college recruiters were white, mostly men and most had never ventured into Harlem or any similar area. Ruth could speak "college" having been at Manhattanville for so many years, and could also bridge the cultural gap between the students and the admission folks. She was fearless and relentless in getting students into colleges with good financial support and saw to it that we kept in touch with the students when they went off to school. (One kid came back from a rural college upstate and said "Mother Dowd, more happens in Harlem in a snow blizzard on a Tuesday night at 3am than has EVER happened in this college!" She encouraged him to stick it out--although she also agreed with him....

She continued this work of capacity building in the school for a couple years and then, knowing that her mission there was always to be a transition--not a permanent fixture, she left the school. Harlem Prep subsequently it became a part of

the NYC school system as continued private funding was impossible to get to sustain the independent school. Ruth returned to college teaching-- first at Megdar Evers College in Brooklyn, then set up a program for older adult learners at the College of New Rochelle and eventually retuned to Manhattanville and again initiated a whole new set of programs for adult learners-- as a Dean.

You note that she was "dispensed from cloister"-- well, you can sure say that again! She was a trail blazer, totally unpretentious and adverse to any focus on her and utterly fearless in pursuing new ideas. She was totally committed to the power of an education---convinced that it was critical to a successful, fulfilling life.

Now, having said all this, let me be the very first to say she would HATE this summary and want to beat me up. Well, I am in Denver and she in the wilds of upstate Albany so she can't get me and it she does, I will deny it! Despite her considerable decline, she still has a powerful gaze!I
I consider working for her and remaining her friend all these years to be among the greatest gifts of my life.

Nancy M. McMahon, PsyD
