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Jerry Naunheim, Jr.



K-8 principal Maurice Harper counsels a young student.

Top: Members of the St. Martin de Porres choir, at left, at the Kennedy Center on March 8, 2009. They also shook hands with President Obama. Choir director Frederica von Stade stands behind the President.

Bottom: School president Barbara Dawson, RSCJ, center, with students at St. Martin de Porres.

# St. Martin

A place everyone loves to be



Katie Ackerly

# de Porres

In one of the worst drug/gang neighborhoods in Oakland, California, stands a school where positive energy abounds: a place of curiosity, discipline, growth, security, and faith. A place everyone loves to be.

Named for a Peruvian saint who was the illegitimate son of a Spanish nobleman and a freed black slave, St. Martin de Porres (SMDP) School was started in 1996 to serve the families of West and Northwest Oakland. Currently, the school is located on two campuses – a K-5 campus at Martin Luther King and 41st Street and a middle school 6-8 campus at Peralta and 10th. Good feelings and high energy prevail at both locations; students, teachers, parents, staff, grandparents, contractors, volunteers, and even the mailman like being there.

## The students, the parents, the grandparents

**The students** generally live along the San Pablo Avenue corridor from the Port of Oakland on the West to the Southern border of Berkeley. They are diverse and, in general, financially needy.

Girls wear plaid jumpers; the boys, black pants and maroon sweatshirts or sweaters. “We bring some structure to students’ lives – a constant many don’t have at home – and we help them understand how to navigate the system so they can be productive adults,” says school president Barbara Dawson, RSCJ. “We give them expectations to live up to, not just for the sake of rules, but because somebody else will expect them to be at work some day. Sometimes SMDP is their only outlet so they love to come here. Many of our students just stay in their houses – except for school.”

**The parents** work hard to give their children an education at SMDP and almost all work outside the home. Most of the African American parents have a high school education and many have, or are pursuing, higher education. While some Latino parents have been in the United States a number of years, most are recently arrived from Mexico – and the vast majority are mono-lingual Spanish speaking.

SMDP parents typically work in healthcare, transportation, construction, landscaping, housecleaning and related trades. Their median income is \$24,000, and parents commit to thirty service hours as part of their contract with the school. “It’s been hard for some neighborhood groups here in Oakland to work together,” said Sister Dawson. “We have the same kids as the public schools have – but our parents have gotten it together and made a commitment to their children.”

**The grandparents** help raise the students too, mainly because the parents are at work. A grandparents group meets weekly at the K-5 campus; they support one another in supporting their grandchildren. “These folks are seventy-five years old and still working,” says Sister Dawson. “And I know every single family here. We use those family relationships and do what everybody knows works. We keep the kids safe – and they know it.”

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## The teachers

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K-8 principal Maurice Harper says his grandmother, an African Methodist, liked the corduroy pants the boys wore and insisted he go to school at the Sacred Heart Parish in Oakland. “So I did,” he said, “I even took the name “Martin de Porres” as my confirmation name...years later, when Sister Barbara invited me to work at this school, I wanted to be that same kind of caring, connecting person who got me through grade school. I love being here.”

It shows. Mr. Harper was part coach, part choreographer, as he rehearsed energetic kindergarten girls with pom-poms spelling out SMDP for the Catholic Schools Week parade and pointed out how quietly a VERY energetic kindergarten boy could close the door...And perhaps only he could get on the intercom first thing on a rainy morning (an unusual situation in Oakland) to announce that recess and lunch would be indoors, and settle even the kindergartners with his calming voice: “Peace...quiet...peace. We pray for the gift of understanding...together we acknowledge our blessings and work to achieve our dreams.”

Two RSCJ are on the faculty – and both teach math. Trudy Considine, RSCJ, herself one of eleven children, calls SMDP “a place that feels like home.” Working with the advanced math class, she said she enjoys it most when the class can do something special. “It’s exciting to stretch and do more, exciting to see the kids excel,” she said. “What’s especially fun is to be able to go on field trips and take them beyond the regular classroom.” Kathy Buschman, RSCJ, says it is important for each child to feel loved for who he or she is, each and every day. “I enjoy teaching at St. Martin de Porres Middle school,” she says. “There is never a dull moment and I am never bored! I love the spontaneity, enthusiasm and boundless energy the students bring to school.”

Volunteer teacher – and noted mezzo-soprano – Frederica von Stade, herself a Sacred Heart (Noroton) alumna, also loves being at SMDP. Ms. Von Stade directs the St. Martin de Porres Children’s Choir – and also helps drive students to different musical events. In fact, she arranged for the choir to sing at the Kennedy Center on March 8, 2009, in a special concert celebrating Senator Ted Kennedy’s birthday.

## What do you dream for your child?

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Middle School counselor Dennis Flannery says he wants 7th and 8th graders to understand that high school is the next step and get them talking about college. “We also talk about the unfairness of the world,” he said. “I tell them there’s a good chance they will be stopped for doing something they didn’t do – and that how they respond will affect their life.”



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Top: Trudy Considine, RSCJ, with a young math student.  
Bottom: Positive energy – and right answers – at St. Martin de Porres.

Topics discussed at a January 2009 faculty meeting at SMDP included curriculum mapping for the rest of the year, a special parade and writing contest to celebrate Catholic Schools Week, and the behavior of individual students.

“We check in regularly on how we are doing with specific students,” says curriculum specialist Kathy Gannon-Briggs, “on whether they are getting along on their own and with others – as well as on any “math gaps” or other study-related issues.” Ms. Gannon-Briggs not only makes sure SMDP adheres to state and diocesan standards, she makes sure the curriculum and teaching methods are student-centered.

Humor is high on the list of positive energies at SMDP; a *Top Ten Reasons to Study Math* poster says: “Because studying pi is delicious.” But the questions asked by the faculty are serious: How do we help this student? What do you dream for your child?

### A new model, a multitude of tasks

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Sister Dawson says that for any inner city school to survive, it must come up with a new educational model, something different – and effective. By way of explaining her strategic approach, she said: “I’m a lawyer as well as a religious of the Sacred Heart so I ask: How do we do this?” Her answer was to use the Sacred Heart school structure that separates the day-to-day tasks, the job of the principal, from the administrative overview, the job of the president, and tailor that structure to the community being served.

SMDP is unique in its multiple partnerships, wide array of learnings, and high quality education at low cost. Through strong connections with such organizations and schools as Children’s Hospital Center for the Vulnerable Child, Catholic Charities of the East Bay, the Oakland Community Organization, St. Mary’s College, and the Jesuit School of Theology, SMDP is able to share ideas and resources and offer many more courses and programs. “Sacred Heart Schools in Atherton and Schools of the Sacred Heart in San Francisco are among our staunchest supporters,” says Sister Dawson.

Sports play an important role in the life of most SMDP students, so in addition to academic partnerships, several sport-oriented collaborations have been created. In conjunction with the Prescott-Joseph Center, a soccer league has been created; and last year, the 2nd and 3rd graders at SMDP won diocesan championships!

Multi-tasking takes on new meaning at this high-energy school. The array of white binders on Sister Dawson’s office shelf is an indicator of what her typical day might include: Governance, Communications Committee, Strategic



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The St. Martin de Porres urban gardens are a testament to faith and partnership.

Planning, Current Events, and ITBS (which stands for Iowa Tests of Basic Skills – the gold standard in evaluating scholastic achievement).

“Every one at SMDP is skilled in the art of juggling a variety of tasks – and is critical to our life here,” she says. “Of course Oakland was the home of Jazz – as well as the Black Panthers – so perhaps it’s no surprise that a gift for integrating diverse elements is present here.”

### And – the garden

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Something else everyone loves about SMDP is the garden. On a chaotic street corner, a vibrant garden of nutritious food and beautiful flowers is thriving. Thanks to a partnership with Oakland Based Urban Gardens (OBUGS – you’ve got to love an acronym like that!) the students at SMDP are learning how to plant seeds, water and nurture tender plants, and watch them grow. Growth, security, faith. What’s not to love? ✦