

Re-vision the Vision

by Brother Dan Fenton, FSC

LEO

Lasallian Educational Opportunities (LEO) began with the question of Lasallian identity. What does it mean to be Lasallian? The answer to the question ended up being a call to a new apostolic work that would be a direct service of the poor and that focused on education.



Lasallian Educational Opportunities (LEO) provides educational programs to young people and adults. The programs have as their ultimate goal the students acquiring the skills and attitudes which will liberate the full realization of their human potential, enhance the attainment of their rightful place as full participants in society, and nurture their awareness of the richness of their human dignity and that of others.

Mission

STATEMENT

Imagine a safe place suddenly appearing in Oakland, California where drug dealers, prostitutes, and patrons of the nearby gun store conduct business. Inside this safe place imagine computers, posters, places to study, and books on every conceivable subject. Now watch experienced teachers and dedicated volunteers assist students with homework, academic projects, and computer searches.

Welcome to the Lasallian Educational Opportunities Center (LEO). Each afternoon, up to 50 junior high students arrive by car, bus, and special shuttle from schools in some of the most neglected neighborhoods of Oakland's inner city. Inside, students tackle their daily assignments while adults and older students stand by, ready to help them succeed.

Students at the LEO Center win science fairs, write poetry, learn world geography, and conduct research online. They solve math problems and explore history on CD ROMs.

In the evening, a new group arrives: the high school students. They also win prizes, write, study, research interesting topics, and prepare for college.

Now imagine this same place being open to adults from the neighborhood and picture them mastering computer skills, learning English, and preparing for their General Education Diplomas (GED).

To be honest, I could not fully imagine it myself when we first set foot in an unused building on the corner of Telegraph and MacArthur a little more than four years ago. The director, Brother Christopher Bassen, FSC, had more confidence and optimism than I. Where I saw dangers, he saw an educational mission; where I saw obstacles, he saw opportunities. When we opened the LEO Center

in 1994, Brother Chris, Brother Lawrence Haley, FSC, and myself were the entire official staff . . . well, almost.

Opening the doors with us that first day – and continuing with us to this day – is Mildred Dill'ard, our secretary and receptionist. Ms. Dill'ard, as she is known to all, brings with her the wisdom of 80 years of living the African-American experience. She is also the unmistakable, visible sign of God's love for our students when she greets each one of them every day as they walk through the door.

I believe this place to be sacred ground and feel as though I should take off my shoes before entering, because God is present here in ways that are astonishing. What goes on at the LEO Center is transformational. No one goes out unchanged. Students discover that what seemed to be immovable obstacles are in fact entirely movable. They are being reared by an entire "village" of parents, extended family, teachers, and volunteers. Our students prevail in spite of every social evil and injustice that routinely kills hope in this city.

We, the Brothers, have changed also. Working in partnership with this community of families has put us in touch with the movement of the Spirit. Our volunteers – most of them college students – have discovered a true vocation to the Gospel call for justice by doing the simple and gentle work of sitting next to students and reminding them that all things are possible.

Our community of Brothers is now a community of Brothers and Lasallian Volunteers. We live, work, and pray together. Some of the young people who live nearby have discovered us and find reasons to stop by. Occasionally, we have