

School program offers promise of hope to underserved children

By John T. Miller



The Wolf of Gubbio (played by Ira Hastings) interacts with spectators at a Francis in the Schools presentation. Photos provided

Francis in the Schools, a program designed to provide field trips for underserved school children where they can learn about the life of Francis of Assisi and enjoy a day of fun and entertainment, is now in its sixth year.

Originally conceived of by Carol Weyland Conner, Ph.D., of Sufism Reoriented, the organization has put on over 22 events reaching approximately 12,000 students in grades K-8. In addition to local gatherings, the group has also served students from marginalized communities in New York, Baltimore, and Washington, D.C.

Functioning as a nonprofit 501(c)(3) organization, these programs are staffed and run by volunteers and are funded entirely by donation.

Conner, a psychotherapist who formerly worked with inner-city teens, came up with the idea because of a concern for children growing up in cities marked by unemployment, poverty, deportation,

drugs and crime. "I had long been inspired by Francis of Assisi's example of selfless service to humanity, especially those on the margins of society," said Conner. "These children face challenges of ethnic and social blending and a below-average standard of living, yet they're delighted and encouraged when they learn the inspiring story of Francis of Assisi."

Current Executive Director of the program, Terry Hogan Johnson, who is also the music director of the White Horse Chorale, the Consortium of the Arts choruses and the Meher Schools' White Horse Youth Chorale, says there are many parallels of Francis's life that resonate with the kids today.

"Francis was originally petrified of lepers, just like people today have problems dealing with Aids victims or the homeless," she said.

The day begins with transportation to the event and then a high-quality theatrical production that



Giant puppets are used to represent oppressive people, such as Francis's father or the local magistrate.

dramatizes universal human values. According to Conner, "When children see these values dramatized, they recognize and understand them and internalize them."

One story that resonates with the children is the Wolf of Gubbio that terrorizes the village until Francis realizes that it is merely hungry. "They get the connection to homelessness and hunger," relates Johnson.

"If only the homeless could be cared for, they wouldn't do so much harm to the village."

Next, participants are escorted to a unique faire with activities to inspire and delight. These activities, like face-painting, noncompetitive games, and interacting with nature, are designed to "help the children feel respected, appreciated, and loved, to build their self-esteem and confidence," said Conner. "We try to nurture feelings of kindness, courage, and self-worth."

A favorite activity of Johnson's is at the end of the faire, when

each child is allowed to pick from a colorful array of flowers to make a bouquet to take home. The San Francisco Flower Mart, through the volunteer work of Kim Hunter-Reay, donates thousands of stems of roses, orchids, asters, daisies, sunflowers, mums, and other flowers for the children to choose from.

"Once it was El Salvadoran Mother's Day and a group of students from a San Francisco school made flower arrangements for their mothers and grandmothers," said Johnson. "On any other occasion they would have had nothing to give them."

While the day is ripe with religious overtones, the organization tries to deliver simple, nonreligious and nonsectarian statements for all denominations.

"We prefer to present Francis as an historical figure," Johnson said. "It's wonderful to be presenting in the San Francisco area, the namesake of Saint Francis. Plus, we are surrounded by some of his fellow

followers, like San Leandro, named for his friend Leo, and Santa Clara representing his devoted companion Saint Clare."

The group has presented in San Francisco at St. Mary's Cathedral, at San Damiano Retreat in Danville and in Oakland, along with cities on the East Coast.

The city of Baltimore, where many poor children live in difficult situations, asked for Francis in the Schools to present as part of their 250th anniversary.

In Washington, D.C., Georgetown University hosted the event, and, according to Johnson, prompted one junior high student to remark, "What do I have to do to go to a school like this?"

When New York wanted a Francis in the Schools presentation to coincide with the visit of Pope Francis, Johnson called some former students of hers to help stock the supply of volunteers. One of the volunteers overheard a participant say that the day made her feel like a princess: "But it's over now," the young lady admitted, "and now we have to go back. But we'll always have today."

Conner summed up the program, saying, "It is a celebration of the resilience, wonder, and joy in the children, of the kindness, compassion, and service Francis modeled for others, and the inspiration and encouragement children gain from learning about the life of this remarkable man."

Those interested in more information about the program can contact Terry Johnson at Terry@FrancisInTheSchools.org.

College Advisor

A solid approach to the 'Why Our College' essay

By Elizabeth LaScala, PhD

In October of 2016 President Barack Obama issued a proclamation deeming November National College Application Month. He might have been dealing with one application firsthand, since his oldest daughter, Malia, was im-

mersed in the process. This year, many seniors are once again working overtime to complete their college applications. One question that they often struggle with is how to approach the "Why our college?" essay.

It is important to understand that every college or university is trying to accomplish at least two things by asking this popular question. First, the college wants to learn if the applicant has done the research necessary to know exactly

why he or she is applying to their school. And second, the college wants to determine if the student is a good match for their campus.

In order to make these decisions, they ask questions that will help them to understand what the student knows about the school beyond name recognition. What are the specific factors that appeal? For example, is it the quarter system that permits many courses to be taken, making a dual major more feasible? Or perhaps it is the exploratory curriculum for freshman engineering students, permitting them to determine what area of engineering is best before choosing it as a major. Maybe a prospective applicant is excited by the option to apply to the honors college in the sophomore year, if she is not eligible as an incoming freshman. If the student wants to major in finance, do investment banking companies have a strong presence on campus at the college's career fairs? If the applicant is uncertain about his path, how easy or hard is it to change majors?

If the prospective student has done sufficient homework, the response to the "Why our college?" essay will reflect that effort and prove that he is truly a great fit for their school.

Here are eight basic tips:

1. Don't talk about location—many colleges are located in great towns and cities, but you are going to college for an education, not to sight-see. So it is best to leave out the "I just love NYC!" type of comment. Instead, clearly demonstrate the link between what you want to study, your future goals and the school's academic offerings.
2. Don't talk in generalities. Be specific.
3. Do not repeat what the college says on its website. Dig deeper to learn more.
4. If possible, visit the campus before you write your response, or at least do a virtual tour. Write specifics about what you liked when you visited. If you talked to current students, mention something they said that deepened your understanding of the school.
5. Many college representatives

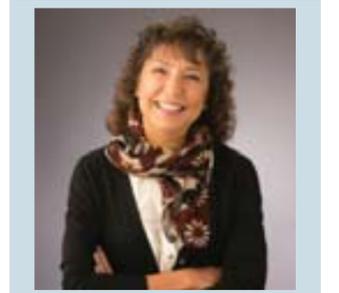
travel around the nation to make presentations at college fairs, high schools and other venues during the fall – look for those opportunities under the events tab on the college's website and at your high school's counseling office.

6. Point to some of the programs, research opportunities or projects that excite you. If you have done something similar over the summer or during the school year, explain why you hope to continue and expand that experience in college.

7. Write about more than one area of interest. That could be a club, sport, research opportunity, a study abroad program, volunteer work, an internship or anything else that truly appeals to you.

8. Even if the school is not one of your top picks, you must find valid reasons for applying. No one wants to feel second best, including colleges, and a lackluster response can result in a rejection letter from a school you considered a 'safe bet.'

Now you are on your way to writing a great essay! Remember, your overall goal is to discover specific details that appeal to you about each school, and then add in your personal experiences to show the connection between the person you are now, and what kind of college student you will be on campus over the next four years.



Elizabeth LaScala, PhD, brings decades of admissions expertise to personally guide each student through applying to well-matched colleges, making each step more manageable and less stressful. She has placed hundreds of students in the most prestigious colleges and universities in the U.S. Reach her at (925) 385-0562 (office) or (925) 330-8801 (mobile), or online at www.doingcollege.com or Elizabeth@doingcollege.com.

Advertising Opportunity

Healthy Lifestyles

— special section in Lamorinda Weekly

This special section will be published inside the January 27 issue of Lamorinda Weekly and will focus on healthy habits such as eating right, exercise, and preventing injuries as well as information related to managing mental and physical health, chronic ailments and disease.



Advertorial Feature

This is an opportunity to submit content to share with our readers: up to 700 words with a photo, logo and contact information.

Display ads

Promote your health related service or professional practice: yoga, meditation, injury prevention, physical therapy, nutritional counseling, massage, health screening, mental health, health insurance

Please call or email:

Wendy Scheck

925-377-0977

wendy@lamorindaweekly.com

www.lamorindaweekly.com



Independent, locally owned and operated!

When you need a doctor and you need one now

LAGGE STUDIO SPA
Lagge Studio Spa is a full-service day spa and wellness center. We offer a variety of services including massages, facials, manicures, pedicures, and more. Call us today to book your appointment.

Diablo Acupuncture
Experience the Difference. Our licensed acupuncturists use traditional Chinese medicine to help you achieve your health goals. We offer a variety of services including pain management, stress reduction, and more.

Prostate Relief With Rezum
By Joshua Winkler, MD. A minimally invasive procedure that uses heat to shrink the prostate gland, Rezum is a safe and effective treatment for BPH. It's a great option for men who want to avoid surgery.