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David Brown
Illinois Wesleyan University

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Contact: David Brown (309) 556-3181

"He's Hooked"

Field Trip to Tutoring Project Opens Eyes of IWU Junior To Challenges Facing Chicago's Cabrini-Green Youngsters

Editor's Note: Rod Roberts, an Illinois Wesleyan University junior majoring in criminology, and his family reside at 710 Brentwood, Tilton, Ill.

BLOOMINGTON, Ill.—After Rod Roberts visited Chicago's Cabrini-Green neighborhood last year, he was hooked.

A junior at Illinois Wesleyan University, Roberts was observing students participating in the Cabrini Connections' Tutor/Mentoring Program, located at Montgomery Ward's corporate headquarters—across the street from the Cabrini-Green public housing project.

The program offers educational and enrichment programs for seventh to 12th graders from the Cabrini-Green neighborhood, a poverty-stricken and crime-scarred public housing project on Chicago's West Side.

"We talked with half a dozen kids when we were there," said Roberts, who visited Cabrini Connections after hearing about the tutoring/mentoring program through James Sikora, an IWU sociology professor. "It was an eye-opening experience."

The tutoring/mentoring program is an outgrowth of the Cabrini-Green Tutoring Program, Inc., which was headed from 1975 to 1992 by Dan Bassill, a 1968 IWU graduate. The original program was a volunteer effort by Montgomery Ward employees. Bassill ran the program on a part-time basis when he was a Ward's advertising executive.

"The name, Cabrini Connections," Bassill said in a 1992 interview with *Illinois Wesleyan University Magazine*, "indicates that we seek to reach out from our roots and history in Cabrini-Green to develop supporting connections throughout Chicago and America to help bring solutions to crises of underachieving youth in America."

Part of that solution involves sparking an interest in education in a ghetto environment that discourages success.

Cabrini youngsters meet with volunteers on the 21st floor of Ward's headquarters, where they are tutored in reading, math, and other subjects, and "hang out" during the week.

But one of the key obstacles these kids have to overcome is territoriality, according to Roberts.

"Kids have to join gangs if they want to get to school, because they have to cross territories," Roberts said. "Some were able to get around the gangs to get to Cabrini Connections. I don't know how they did it."

Illinois Wesleyan students and faculty have twice taken field trips to Cabrini Connections to learn how the program works and meet with volunteers and youngsters.

Sikora, along with faculty, administrators, and students formed a Cabrini Connections advisory board last spring.

"We wanted to get the staff, faculty and students involved in helping Cabrini Connections," Sikora said, adding that the Cabrini-Green environment offered unique opportunities and experiences for students interested in volunteering and social work.

"Since Dan Bassill is an alumnus," Sikora added, "he wanted to give IWU the first priority in getting involved. It was an opportunity we didn't want to miss."

Part of the advisory board's mission is to gather IWU students who want to correspond with Cabrini youngsters, before they visit the university on April 9.

"We want the kids to relate to people when they get here," said Monica Taylor, IWU director of multi-cultural affairs, explaining the importance of IWU students becoming pen pals with Cabrini-Green youngsters.

Taylor said the trips to campus were planned to give the kids a glimpse of what can be accomplished with hard work in high school.

Roberts said the advisory board is planning at least one trip to Cabrini Connections before the youngsters travel to IWU. When they came to IWU last year, Roberts said, many of the Cabrini youngsters "had never seen anything like it."

"I heard them say, 'I want to go to school here,'" he said.

Roberts, like other student advisory board members, wants to apply his experiences with Cabrini Connections to his career.

A criminology major, Roberts wants to attend law school.

"In a perfect world, we could fix problems in society," Roberts said. "In the book of educating children about crime and drugs, I'd like to add my chapter."

Taylor is a member of the advisory board, which also includes: Sikora, Director of Public Relations Bob Aaron, Provost and Dean of Faculty Janet McNew, Chairperson of Economics Michael Seeborg, and Associate Director of Development Yvonne Jones. Student members include Keeley Cultra, a senior psychology major from Onarga, Ill., Geoff Phillips, a senior computer science major from Emden, Ill., Angela Smith, a junior economics major from Springfield, and Aye Win, a junior sociology major from Manila, Philippines. Tangela Smith, 17, from Josephinum High School, Chicago, and a Cabrini Connections' participant, is also on the board.

Board members who visited Cabrini Connections said the experience countered some of their stereotypes of inner-city youths, since television paints pictures of gun-toting, drugged-out gangsters who thrive on violence and reject education and upward mobility.

"They didn't seem like typical inner-city kids," Roberts said. "They were more open-minded, not stereotypical like you see on T.V."

IWU, founded in 1850, enrolls about 1,850 students in a College of Liberal Arts, College of Fine Arts, and a four-year professional School of Nursing. A \$15 million athletics and recreation center opened in the fall of 1994; and a \$25 million science building opened in the fall of 1995. The Carnegie Commission for the Advancement of Teaching promoted Illinois Wesleyan to a "Baccalaureate I" institution in 1994, a classification that places it among 161 highly selective National Liberal Arts Colleges in the annual *U.S. News & World Report* rankings. *Barron's Profiles of American Colleges*, another respected college guide, rated IWU "highly competitive (+)" in its latest edition.