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A Brazen Guidance Counselor Tries To Get South Bronx Kids to College

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NEW YORK -- Because Kathy Morgan believes in the Christian doctrine of free will, she offers her students at All Hallows Catholic High School a choice about their future.

"So, you want to get out of the South Bronx?" she asks 17-year-old Brian Seymour, who just slumped into a chair in her pin-neat office. No response. She waits. "Yo, Brian. It's a simple yes or no."



Kathy Morgan

"Umm, yes, Ms. Morgan," says Brian, who has no parents, a home on a nightmare street and a class rank of 88th ... out of 88 seniors. "I mean, I definitely want to get out. Who wouldn't?"

"Fine, I'll take it from here," she says, all business and in-your-face, as she shoves an application form for all the state universities of New York across her desk. "Have this back to me tomorrow morning. First thing, or I'll come looking for you."

There are many people at All Hallows a three-story brick box under a statue of the Virgin Mary, hard beside an open-air drug market-involved in the effort to send every one of All Hallows' 88 seniors to college. But none is more brazen than Kathy Morgan, the school's lone college-placement counselor.

A College Try

Last year, initiatives led by Ms. Morgan somehow got all of All Hallows' seniors accepted to four-year colleges, an astonishing 100%. The struggle, as spring approaches, is to do the same for this year's senior class, despite their average combined Scholastic Aptitude Test score of 870 out of 1,600, despite the fact that nearly two-thirds are from single-parent families and are on public assistance, despite the opposing tug of relentless mayhem all around.

"I'm not a particularly religious person," says Ms. Morgan, a 39-year-old with a Brooklyn accent and a demeanor that might be called Rosie O'Donnell with an edge. "But I figure God must really have a sense of humor to drop me in this spot. On celestial television, this has got to be a hit sitcom. This week on 'Morgan in Hell,' Kathy runs screaming through the halls... ."

This week -- the first in March -- Morgan is hustling to save her last stragglers, a handful of students who have ducked, faked, hid and otherwise managed to elude her grasp. Her mission is to guide them past problems with confused, often beleaguered parents and rigid, by-the-book teachers toward a foreign idea: that they actually belong in college.

That idea -- that notion of what is possible for poor black and Latino kids -- flowered at All Hallows only after years of slow growth. The school, which opened near Yankee Stadium in 1931, was flirting with a wrecking ball six years ago. There were sound reasons for it to close -- high drop-out rates, fewer than 20% of graduates going to college, an inability to attract teachers -- that stemmed from familiar shifts during the last century in large American cities.

It is an urban history that is bound to the history of the school. In the 1930s, All Hallows was a home for poor or lower-middle-class Catholic kids -- Irish, mostly, some Italian -- who lived along the Bronx's Grand Concourse. The Christian Brothers, then a robust order housing 25 at the school, were educators with a penchant for discipline. They

drilled students on the classics and carried leather straps in the deep pockets of their robes. For any infraction, kids held out their palms.

"I'd stand in the back of the line, so by the time they'd get to me, their arms would be tired," says Walter O'Hara, 63, looking down at his palms as though they might still be red. "We knew what was expected of us. No questions asked. I'm a product of that place." By the time he graduated in 1952, Mr. O'Hara recalls that the neighborhood had already risen to "more of a middle-class area, very nice, with Irish, Jewish and Italian, mostly. The Yankee ballplayers kept apartments at a hotel on the Grand Concourse, which was like Broadway, like Fifth Avenue."

Mr. O'Hara, unearthing memories, gazes out the window of his managing director's office at Allen & Co., the investment bank, which overlooks Fifth Avenue, as he recalls getting word in 1993 that his old school was failing. The neighborhood had long since become famous more for blight than baseball. "It wasn't the school I'd known. And those kids may look different than we did, but that shouldn't make a difference. We were allowed to get to the plate to take three good swings. Those kids deserve three good swings, too."

He called other Irish-American investment bankers, many of them All Hallows alumni, and raised money to keep the school open. Soon, facilities were upgraded, a new administration was hired, and a bridge was stretched between one group who made good from the Bronx and another fighting just to make it out.

It remains a rickety bridge. The school is supported almost exclusively on about \$1.3 million raised each year in donations, and the recent college-acceptance rates -- though stunning -- are the result of a sort of academic trapeze act, without net, effected each day in the halls.

Ms. Morgan, like most All Hallows teachers, is the product of no-nonsense Catholic schools. The nuns at her all-girls academy, she says, "were always in your face. It was, 'Do it, or else.'" Such lessons came in handy, years later, when she worked as a college basketball coach, a physical-education teacher at Manhattan's plush Columbia Preparatory School and, eventually, an English teacher at a school in impoverished Monterey, Mexico.

Returning to New York in 1995, she recalls having an "irresistible profile: single, Irish-Catholic girl -- no job, no life, no future. Last resort for all the wayward, of course, is to call the archdiocese. So, they tell me, 'Well, let's see, now ... we've got something in the South Bronx.' I said, 'You better give me directions.' "

Ms. Morgan began to experiment with her role in 1996. The Christian Brothers and Mr. O'Hara had just hired a new principal. Thirty-five kids were expelled that year, sending a strong message to students. A mandatory daily reading period for the whole school was instituted.

'You Want Diversity?'

But discipline only went so far, Ms. Morgan recalls. Most of the kids "weren't even applying to go anywhere. Lots of them would just graduate and go back to the streets. But I heard colleges all talking about 'real diversity,' both racial and economic. So, I figure, 'You want diversity? I'll give you diversity.'" She planned for six top students to secretly visit Holy Cross College, the competitive, mostly white college in Worcester, Mass., where she had developed some contacts.

When All Hallows' new principal, Sean Sullivan, found out about the trip, he objected, saying there was no way they would be accepted to such a selective college. They went anyway. A few months later, acceptance letters came back: six for six. "We were all shocked," Mr. Sullivan says now. "After that, I told Kathy, 'Keep doing whatever it is you're doing. I'm giving you an open field. Just go crazy.' "

She did. All Hallows, like many urban schools, forces juniors to take a class in SAT preparation. Ms. Morgan created a second curricular requirement: the writing of a college-application essay. "Just to make sure, I gave them a couple of models. The thing is, these kids really have something to write about," says Ms. Morgan, who has all the essays neatly filed in her desk drawer before senior year begins. She pulls out this year's thick folder and starts flipping pages. "Look at these, one after another -- shootings, drug-dealing, wanting to find a better life in America. How can you say 'no' to these essays?"

Initiatives were launched to gather teacher recommendations and financial-aid forms by the end of junior year. For the latter, Ms. Morgan regularly interrupts classes with this message: "Listen, I don't care if you get into Harvard. You

don't fill out the financial-aid forms, you won't be going anywhere except that Burger King down the street to spend the next 25 years in that really attractive paper hat." She bundles applications and sends them off herself -- hundreds of them.

It is odd that so much authority would be seized by a guidance counselor, so often a sleepy custodian of college-application materials at many better schools. In fact, she is one of three guidance counselors, each of whom has a full plate of social-work responsibilities. But it is the way Ms. Morgan has elevated her added job, college counselor, into the endgame of years of work by countless teachers on behalf of students that has won her such clout.

"The difference with Kathy Morgan," says Mr. O'Hara of Allen & Co., "is that she views what she does in an entrepreneurial way. I'm used to seeing entrepreneurs who are forceful about their ideas. In her area, though, you don't find many people who take control."

Of course, most guidance counselors respect the autonomy of their students. Ms. Morgan says that is a luxury her students can't afford. "When it comes to their futures, you can't rely on them getting direction from elsewhere. Look, often there are no parents at home, or parents who have no idea what's outside of South Bronx. I have to make decisions. College is better than no college, period. So, I tell them, 'I've picked out a couple of colleges you can get accepted to and that's where you're going. You'll thank me later, when you're president.' "

The Stragglers

After a year poking and prodding the class of 1999, some seniors have started getting letters of acceptance. Meanwhile, time is running out for her last two stragglers, Brian Seymour and Andres Sierra, who haven't yet applied anywhere.

A stream of crises washes across her desk. A kid comes in who doesn't know what his mother does, so he can't fill out the financial-aid form. Ms. Morgan deadeyes him: "Ask her about her job ... tonight!" An administrator arrives with bad news: A top student has been suspended for skipping school and forging a note from his mother. A meeting is scheduled with the school's dean of discipline. Expulsion is possible. "Don't worry," Ms. Morgan tells the administrator. "This kid's had some problems at home and he's got good numbers. No one's touching him. He's looking at college, not expulsion." He seems relieved, knowing -- as she does -- that everything is now secondary to imminent college acceptances.

As the afternoon passes, she works the phones. New York has particularly strong educational-opportunity programs that help her get application fees waived and get kids who are academically and financially underprivileged into colleges in New York. For out-of-state schools like Holy Cross, results mostly come through brow beating. Those first six, trailblazing kids who were accepted into Holy Cross in 1996, actually ended up going to Notre Dame University, Middlebury College, Skidmore College and Trinity College, all of which offered generous financial-aid packages. The next year, Ms. Morgan made copies of each college's package and sent them to Holy Cross. "I told them, here's what your competition is doing," she says. "You want my kids, get with the program." Last year, Holy Cross did, enhancing its financial-aid packages for six 1998 graduates, all of whom enrolled.

Sitting at her desk, Ms. Morgan calls up the Holy Cross admissions office to talk about this year's applicants and check on alumni who are now students. "Everyone OK up there?" she asks pensively, part of the regular checkups she does on previous graduates who are now in college. The admissions official, who administers programs for underprivileged students, assures her all All Hallows graduates are still enrolled and thriving.

'Once They Can Clear Their Heads'

She hangs up, relieved. "I'm always nervous that they'll fail when they get to college. But they never seem to. It's amazing. I've got kids with combined SATs of 600 who are at colleges. Not Yale. Decent places, though. People gasp about this. But the kids do fine. What I've learned is that our kids are incredibly adaptable, ingenious at survival, and they can't afford to fail. Once they get away from the madness of their lives in South Bronx -- once they can clear their damn heads -- they eventually figure things out. That's what I tell the colleges. Give them a little time, they'll do you proud. The colleges are finally figuring that out."

Of the several hundred students she has placed, she has had time to personally check up on at least three-quarters, she says, all of whom are still in college. She says she has heard of a couple of kids who have moved between colleges,

and a handful -- she estimates only four or five -- who have dropped out. The next morning at 8:15 in the cafeteria, Ms. Morgan plucks caps off students' heads before homeroom (no hats are allowed in the school) as she spots her prey: "You got something for me?"

Brian Seymour hands her his completed application. "Surprised?" he says.

"Not in the least, my man," she says. "This is all I need."

After the strong start, though, Brian's day soon collapses. He gets into a verbal exchange with a teacher and is ejected from class. Teachers and administrators -- Ms. Morgan included -- huddle. They recognize that Brian is under acute stress: altercations at school with teachers and students, academic pressures, and worries about the elderly aunt who raised him and has severe diabetes. They set up a program of tutoring and after-class work to get him to graduation.

After an hour in after-school study -- a time for quiet reading and homework for kids who failed two or more classes in the previous marking period -- Brian walks into the nearly empty halls. He'd rather not see anyone. He'd like to just edge out and let this day be over with. And he does, slipping out onto a sunny sidewalk in front of the school, taking a deep breath.

Ms. Morgan files in behind him. He turns, surprised.

"Tough day, huh?" she says.

"Yeah, not so good," he mumbles, looking away.

"You're going to make it. Right?" she says, blocking his path. "We agreed. Right?"

"I hope so, Ms. Morgan. I hope so." He meets her gaze.

Back in her office a moment later, she bores in on her other straggler. Andres Sierra, ranked 64, disappeared from All Hallows in January when his mother couldn't pay \$500 in tuition for the semester. After a few days at the Bronx's Taft High School, with its metal detectors and chaos, an alumnus paid Andres's tuition and he returned to school. Now, Ms. Morgan is pressing him on her single issue: "In three months you're going to walk down the aisle at graduation, so -- the question -- what will you be doing in September?"

Andres is ready: "Marines."

"No way, you're not going to the Marines." Ms. Morgan recently pulled two seniors out of the Navy. Both are now accepted to college.

Andres, a handsome kid who works after school at a health club, and is anxious to get to his job, seems confused. "But ... I sort of decided."

"All right, why do you want to go into the Marines?"

He says that his older brother is in the Marines and "says it's pretty good and all." She closes the door and, over the next 15 minutes, probes Andres's psyche, eventually learning that Andres's mother actually wants to him to go to college and that his brother, whom he looks up to, isn't all that happy in the Marines.

"Guess what, Andres? You're going to learn from your brother's mistakes."

He laughs and fumbles with his blue All Hallows sweater -- mandatory here -- and his Mickey Mouse tie. She pulls out his SATs: 360 verbal. 200 math. "Let me guess -- you were flirting with some girl in the test center." He blushes. "Two of them." She closes the deal. "All right, you're taking the SATs again at the end of March and you're filling out this college-application form and bringing it to me in the morning." She shoves it in his hand. The room is quiet. Andres sits for a moment, uncertain. "You really think I can go to college?" he says tentatively, having dropped his cool shield.

Ms. Morgan gets up, walks around the desk, and puts her hand on his shoulder. "College, right now, looks like Mount

Everest. It's not. It's a gentle hill, long but gentle -- and you, my man, are going all the way up. For the rest of the day and tonight, I want you to say, 'I'm going to college.' See how good it feels."

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