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## 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 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](mailto:Terry@FrancisInTheSchools.org).



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

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[back](#)

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