

A collaboration with kids in mind



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Father Tom Neitzke, president of the Jesuit Academy, worked with the Boys and Girls Clubs of Omaha to create a partnership in which the two share resources for the common goal of educating youth and breaking the cycle of poverty. Here, Neitzke talks with Willie Kent, 12, after school and before boarding the bus to head to the Boys and Girls Clubs' north unit.

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COLUMNIST

Could a collaboration between two Omaha nonprofits that serve the young — one religious, one secular — become a national model?

Father Tom Neitzke thinks so. He wrote a dissertation as part of his doctorate of education at Creighton University this spring on the real-life, practical linkage of the Jesuit Academy and the Boys and Girls Clubs of Omaha.

Both serve kids from the poorest section of Omaha, and the result of their cooperation is a \$1.2 million improvement to the clubs' camp and

an affiliation for years to come.

"This plan," wrote Neitzke, the Jesuit Academy's president, "offers a blueprint that other nonprofit organizations across the United States may follow to facilitate similar projects."

Whether or not the collaboration makes a splash nationally, it surely did so Wednesday — when 20 kids, after a countdown at a dedication ceremony, jumped all at once into a new outdoor swimming pool.

That marked the official completion of the

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Isalah Stennis, 10, lines up just the right shot while playing pool with his Jesuit Academy classmate Keynan Meeks, 10, at the Boys and Girls Clubs of Omaha. As part of the collaboration with the clubs, academy students attend school from 7:50 a.m. until 4:30 p.m., and then are taken by vans to the clubs' north unit at 2610 Hamilton St.

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Kelly: Partnering nonprofits appeal to more donors

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physical improvement project. But helping young people in poverty improve their lives is a project without end.

What's unusual about the two groups' collaboration, Neitzke said, is that rather than competing for donor dollars, a religious nonprofit organization and a secular one are "working together to serve the needs of the urban poor right here in north Omaha."

And that kind of religious-secular collaboration — fostered by Neitzke and the clubs' CEO, Ivan Gilreath — appealed to donors, who pledged the money needed in a matter of weeks.

"We were able to appeal to a broader range of donors," Neitzke said in an interview, "than those who would just give to the club or to the academy."

The result is not only significant improvements to the Boys and Girls Clubs' Camp Nakomis in Carter Lake, but also in providing a camp for the Jesuit Academy's students well into the future. New to the camp are an activity center, five classrooms, an athletic field and the outdoor pool.

The project was about far more than fun and games. Both groups are working to break the cycle of poverty in what has been called one of the poorest African-American communities in the nation.

The Boys and Girls Clubs for many years have served youths across the metro area — about 5,900 last year.

The Jesuit Academy, previously called the Jesuit Middle School, opened in 1996 in a former YMCA at 2311 N. 22nd St. The school educates 65 boys in grades four through eight.

When he arrived in Omaha four years ago, Neitzke (pronounced Nights-key) noted that the school didn't have one feature of many other Jesuit middle schools across the country: a summer camp.

So he started one, paying rent to the Omaha Archdiocese for a camp at 245th and Q Streets.

For six weeks over three summers, students attended academic and life-skills classes in the morning and enjoyed camp activities in the afternoon, including swimming. They stayed overnight once a week.

"For some of our kids," he said, "this was the first time they had caught a frog or flown a kite."

The archdiocese wanted to sell the property but couldn't agree on a price with the Jesuit Academy. So Neitzke and his board began looking elsewhere.

It so happened that Omaha investment adviser Scott Heider, a member of the academy's board, also served on the board of the Boys and Girls Clubs. He arranged a lunch meeting between Neitzke and Gilreath.

Gilreath was open to collaboration, noting that a joint approach would foster the missions of both organizations: helping kids.

"It was a chance to positively impact different segments of our community in one simple collaboration," Gilreath said. "We just thought it made a lot of sense. His kids are my kids, and vice versa.

"And one thing our donor community the last few years has been consistently asking is, 'Why don't organizations collaborate more?'"

Gilreath and his board agreed to allow the Jesuit Academy to build at the clubs' camp if the academy could raise the money. The academy's board agreed that club members could use any improvements that were built.

Gilreath was already a member of the Jesuit Academy board, and Neitzke joined the board of the Boys and Girls Clubs. The academy paid membership fees for its students to join the clubs.

The academy's school day lasts from 7:50 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.,



Father Tom Neitzke

The president of Jesuit Academy will step down in January and take a job recruiting men to the order.

allowing time for afternoon homework. At the end of each school day, vans take students to the Boys and Girls Clubs' north unit at 2610 Hamilton St.

Gilreath said the collaboration "will allow us to impact lives at a deeper level than ever before."

Neitzke, 40, grew up north of Milwaukee in a white, middle class area that he called "the direct opposite of north Omaha." He said generational poverty causes chronic stress that can have a physical and neurological impact on the brain, which impairs learning.

At Jesuit Academy, 83 percent of students come from families with incomes at or below the poverty level. About two-thirds of Jesuit Academy students live in single-parent households.

But 98 percent of the school's graduates go on to graduate from high school, and 60 percent attend college.

Neitzke also noted the devastating effects of crime in north Omaha neighborhoods. Though Omaha's homicides are down this year — 21 as of last week, compared with 32 at the same time last year — he said killings have primarily occurred in the black community.

He cited a 2011 national study reporting that the homicide rate among blacks in Nebraska was twice the per-capita national average for African-Americans.

A camp, he said, is part of a well-rounded education. The improved Camp Nakomis is only an 8-minute drive from the Jesuit Academy, compared to 30 minutes for the west Omaha camp previously used.

The \$1.2 million improvements will be dedicated at 5 p.m. Wednesday. Major donors were the Lozier Foundation, the Heider family, the Robert B. Daugherty Charitable Foundation, the Hawks Foundation, Paul and Annette Smith and the Wisconsin Province of the Society of Jesus.

The camp was used by Jesuit Academy students and club members this summer while construction continued. It can be used year-round by the school and the club.

Now that the project is completed, Father Neitzke will be moving on. He will step down as academy president in January, and next spring he will assume a new position based either in Milwaukee or Chicago, trying to recruit men to join the Jesuit order.

The Society of Jesus has run Creighton University and Creighton Prep since 1878, but the number of Jesuits is shrinking dramatically.

In 1990, there were 4,582 Jesuits in the United States but last year that had dropped to 2,497. Projections are that by 2020, the number will level off at about 1,000.

Education is a key mission of the Jesuits, and that also means raising money. As Neitzke wrote in his doctoral dissertation, Jesuits "engage benefactors of all faith backgrounds and even people who claim no faith at all."

He hopes that the religious-secular cooperation in Omaha between the Jesuit Academy and the Boys and Girls Clubs can be replicated around the country to attract donors.

"The partnership was not based on religious or secular convictions," he said, "but rather on the larger undertaking of breaking the cycle of poverty through education and enrichment."

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