

Breaking the Cycle of Poverty Through Education

An Interview with Father Mark Connell, Executive Director, San Miguel Program

EDITORS' NOTE *Father Mark Connell also serves as Director of the Graduate Success Program and head coach of the San Miguel Rowing program. Upon ordination in 1986, Father Connell was assigned as parochial vicar at Holy Family Church in New Rochelle for two and a half years, after which time Cardinal John O'Connor asked him to join the faculty at John F. Kennedy High School in Somers. Simultaneously, he became a weekend assistant at the Church of St. John and St. Mary in Chappaqua where he remained for 27 years. In 1998, Father Connell became chaplain and the director of campus ministry at Mount Saint Mary College in Newburgh where he was also an adjunct professor in philosophy and theology, specializing in the Jewish/Catholic dialogue. After living in Newburgh for six years, he envisioned a meaningful educational option for the children of Newburgh. That dream became a reality when San Miguel Academy opened its doors in 2006. Education equality and breaking the cycle of poverty through education are at the forefront of everything Father Connell does for San Miguel Program. He has earned a Masters of Divinity, a Master of Arts in Theology, and a Doctor of Theology from Drew University.*



Father Mark Connell

INSTITUTION BRIEF *San Miguel Academy (SMA) of Newburgh (newburghsanmiguel.org) is breaking the cycle of poverty through education. Students are engaged year-round in a safe and positive learning environment, providing them with a high-quality education that creates opportunities for them after leaving San Miguel Academy. Since opening as a middle school in 2006, San Miguel Academy has grown into the multi-faceted San Miguel Program, serving over 250 students and their families. San Miguel Program is 100 percent scholarship driven and focuses on a 12-year commitment to each student. The Program boasts a 97% graduation rate from independent day and boarding secondary schools and accelerated public school programs, and a 90 percent placement rate to college, trade school, and the military.*

Will you provide an overview of the history of San Miguel Academy?

The genesis for San Miguel Academy came from my experience teaching at a college in the city of Newburgh. Part of my responsibility at Mount Saint Mary College was to get the student

population involved in the Newburgh community; through those efforts, I began to see a level of poverty unlike anything I would have expected in the United States of America. At the same time that I served at the college in my full-time job, I also served as the parish priest at St. John and St. Mary on the weekend, where I began sharing stories with my parishioners about my experiences in Newburgh. I gave them a narrative of the ups and the downs and the trials of being a young person in the city, and those stories proved to be compelling for

all of us.

One day, I simply blurted out that we all know that education is the way to save a child's life. From that point, this little movement of friends and parishioners grew, who said, "You're right. We need to do something about this." This groundswell gave birth to an interest and – because it's Chappaqua and people know how to get things done – a committee was formed, a feasibility study was undertaken, money was raised, and through the efforts of these good people, we soon had everything we needed to proceed with a program to impact children's lives. The choice was made at that point, after some investigation, to go with the Nativity Middle School Model which focuses on intervening in the lives of at-risk children in urban centers right around the age of 10. San Miguel Academy opened in 2006 as a middle school and soon grew into the multi-faceted San Miguel Program. We make a 12-year commitment to each student and their family, which is integral to changing the trajectory of our students' lives. San Miguel Program is 100 percent scholarship driven. In 2020, we purchased the former St. Francis School we had rented for seven years, making SMA a true anchor in our community and a beacon of hope for families. Our location and visibility are central to families in need. Also in 2020, we expanded to enroll girls and our first cohort of young women graduated in 2022. We celebrated our 13th commencement with the Class of 2023 in June. That is the short version of the origins of how San Miguel Program started.

How do you define San Miguel Academy's mission and purpose?

The mission is very clearly defined: breaking the cycle of poverty through education. As I've found over the years, most folks understand that a sound education is the foundation upon which



Harmony painted by international street artist, Francisco Fernandez, with the help of four of San Miguel Academy's top artists

people build their lives and establish their careers. In a city such as Newburgh where a certain demographic – low-income boys – has a long history of not performing in the public system, we sought to serve that demographic.

At the time we were investigating this for the feasibility study, we concluded that only about 10 percent of low-income boys who entered the local public high school graduated in four years. We knew we had to look for options for our students after they left our middle school. In addition to providing a quality, year-round education in a safe and positive learning environment, the purpose of the academy is to seek out private education options for secondary schools that fit the child's aptitude and learning style.

Career readiness is a central and very important focus at San Miguel. Our students develop 21st-century STEAM-based skills that make them competitive in high-demand and well-paying job sectors. The success of our program is reflected in the graduation rates: our students have a 97 percent graduation rate from independent day and boarding secondary schools and accelerated public school programs, and a 90 percent placement rate to college, trade school, and the military. Our Graduate Success Program helps students find the path that's right for them, providing after-school and summer tutoring, mentoring, test preparation, tuition gap assistance, job placement, emotional support, and critical guidance. All of this – all of our efforts – helps keep our students and their families on track for success.

Will you highlight San Miguel Academy's curriculum and programs?

In urban centers around the country, areas that struggle economically, and where school systems are underperforming, there tends to be higher levels of violence, drug use, gang activity, etc. Our students are growing up in a city that is consistently ranked among the most violent cities in the State of New York. We recognize that children who grow up in this environment are highly traumatized. The survival instinct kicks in and the first thing to go in

the learning process is short-term memory. When one is in survival mode, they often do not recall some of the immediate things that may have been learned that day in the classroom because there are bigger concerns involving life and death. Our curriculum seeks to address the trauma-based nature of the population that we're serving. One of the ways that we can stem this tide in urban centers is to embark on kinesthetic learning; to place children outside of the traditional classroom setting of a desk and a chair, and to travel about and look at the wonders of nature where you can encounter all of the sciences, all of the maths, and build literacy skills, all by just leaving the traditional classroom setting. The book, *Last Child in the Woods* by Richard Louv, outlines this beautifully and served as our inspiration and template for our interactive learning program. Developed by SMA teachers, Project and Place-Based Learning is a STEAM-focused approach that serves this particular demographic quite well. STEAM is incorporated into cross-curricular hands-on projects in which students are continually developing problem-solving and higher-order thinking skills. All of this helps to engage and move the child forward in her or his learning.

San Miguel Academy's rowing program has achieved great success. How does the rowing program support the overarching mission of San Miguel Academy?

In the pursuit of breaking the cycle of poverty through education, we're not the only ones who are doing this. There are a lot of very fine programs seeking scholarships for low-opportunity kids at private schools and boarding schools, especially in the New York metropolitan area. In this competitive field, it is incumbent upon us to stand out, so we are always looking for something that will distinguish our children and will help admission counselors to understand that there is a San Miguel difference.

The rowing program was established in 2010 with a small group of boys in borrowed equipment and hand-me-down boats. From the start of the program, we saw an immediate improvement in the child; grades went up, teachers said they were more attentive, and parents said they were more organized at home. The program was purely recreational until Arshay Cooper, author and advocate for expanding the sport of rowing into under-resourced communities, encouraged us to start competing. He was clear in his belief



San Miguel Academy's last all-boys graduating class with speakers Collin Johnson of the New York Giants and Arshay Cooper of A Most Beautiful Thing Foundation

that the sport of rowing needed a program like San Miguel Academy. He then made it possible through his foundation, A Most Beautiful Thing Foundation. We started competing in the fall of 2021, which added a dimension to our rowing program that none of us expected. It put us in the national spotlight. We've competed two years in a row in the USRowing Youth Nationals, and it has added incredible enthusiasm and excitement to the overall program. Most significantly, it has also added a depth and quality to the school and its mission that gets our students noticed. Top-tier schools in the country know that we row and have a high regard for our children and for the quality of their knowledge and ability. Rowing truly has, in terms of opening doors to secondary education, been transformative.

Will you highlight the strength and leadership of San Miguel Academy's faculty?

Our leaders here sign onto a mission, and it's very clear. The culture of the school is palpable and quite strong. Visitors tell us as soon as they come through our doors that they really feel a vibe, that they pick up on the positivity of the culture. All of our employees become a part of the magic that is San Miguel, whether it be our cleaning lady, our faculty, or our administrators – everyone is part of this beautiful effort to create a bright, clean, upbeat environment that is always in pursuit of excellence.

How important has it been for San Miguel Academy to have such an engaged and committed board of trustees?

Given our particular mission, the school is quite relational, and that means, quite simply, people helping people. And when I say that, there's reciprocity. We may think that we're helping the children, but on many levels, they are helping us. We understand that we are not just educators, we are also learners. In the milieu of our environment here, there's a give and a take; we respect each other, trust each other, and we learn from each other, and that extends to our Board of Directors. People often do not understand that a place like Newburgh – this quiet little city of 30,000 on the Hudson River, 60 miles north of Manhattan – would have such struggles. Its dubious distinctions are significant and extreme, with rates of violence, crime, drug activity, and poverty that set it apart from other urban centers. Our Board helps us be a prime mover in making this program successful and sustainable. We are blessed to have an excellent Board of Directors, many of whom were there at our founding, all bright people who are profoundly dedicated to the cause here in Newburgh. We have 14 very competent, very smart, very dedicated board members who own NFL teams, work for the big banks, are top lawyers in New York City, own their own businesses, and several long-time educators. On our Board, we have a vast array of talent that work hand in hand with the administrators to make sure that we can offer the best quality product here in Newburgh. They also get involved in the lives of the children. They know them, and they know their families. We often say here at San Miguel that we are a family. It's just a wonderful blessing to see that as a side effect of the mission that there's no pretension of superiority. This is just people helping people on a very simple level and it works beautifully.



San Miguel Academy's education partners, Storm King Art Center and Mohonk Preserve, provide SMA students with outdoor learning opportunities throughout the year

What has made your experience leading San Miguel Academy so special?

I think the most special part about my role as the Chief Executive Officer at San Miguel is bringing people together. As a member of the founding council and Executive Director for many years, I'm humbled by the number of people who have said to me that they have always looked for a charity that would give them this type of experience; an organization that they would be able to know on a daily basis, where they would get to know the families whom we serve, and where they would become friends with one another. People who may not ordinarily encounter one another in their daily lives are now coming together. As an example, if you attend one of our Scholarship Dinners – our one and only fundraising event each year – you'll see this collection of people from so many different arenas, but through the magic of this mission at San Miguel Academy, they're all in the same room, and there's a tremendous sense of goodness, unity, and purpose. There's a collective optimism that our world can be better if people step away from judgment and polarization and fall back on that which is in every human heart: that we're here to help one another. To me, the most beautiful thing that I get to witness on a regular basis is the outpouring of goodness and generosity that keeps these things alive day upon day.

What are your priorities for San Miguel Academy as you look to the future?

San Miguel Academy is coming up on its 20th anniversary and we are asking ourselves about the long-term sustainability of the program. How do we sustain this? How do we keep this much-needed program in the city of Newburgh going into the next generation? This weighs heavily on all of us – many of whom have been with us since the beginning. So it is that every initiative that we embark upon at this point is around long-term sustainability. We're building a team and a structure to assure that if any one of us were not here tomorrow, the school would continue on in the pursuit of excellence with great vigor. Sustainability is a challenge. Anyone who owns a business understands what that means, and so that is a top priority for us. We're honest in our discussion and we're taking steps forward to assure that this school will be sustainable for the next 20-30 years. ●