

City family tests bishop's claim on schooling

By LAURA YEE
PLAIN DEALER REPORTER

CLEVELAND

Juanita Hewlett was in a serious quandary. For the previous two years, officials at Halle Elementary School off W. 73th St. had been calling nearly every day to report that her nephew, Srivase Hurt, was wreaking havoc on the school bus and in the classroom. He was suspended repeatedly for fighting and being disruptive. His grades were poor, too.

Hewlett, who lives at E. 74th St. and Central Ave., said she knew that unless something changed, Srivase would fall to the perils of crime and drugs. And then, he undoubtedly would end up in jail or dead at a young age.

As a last resort, she took up a challenge issued by Catholic Bishop Anthony M. Pilla. And in recent months, she has witnessed a change for the better.

In an article The Plain Dealer published in August, Pilla said the Cleve-

land Catholic Diocese's schools could successfully educate any inner-city child, even those predisposed to failure because of crime, poverty, violence and other problems.

"I welcome the opportunity if anyone wants to test our ability," said Pilla, as a part of his pitch for a state voucher system allowing tax dollars to go to the school that the child attends.

The diocese draws pupils from population similar to the Cleveland public schools', yet the results vary

dramatically. Average public school pupils read or compute math below the national norm while their parochial school counterparts perform above that level.

The diocese graduates 95% of its pupils and sends 83% of them to four-year colleges. More than a third of the Cleveland public school pupils drop out, and of the pupils who finish high school, about a quarter continue their education.

"I know what I don't want Srivase to be a part of. I wanted to structure his life to really save his life," Hewlett said. "I knew I had a candidate for the bishop."

Srivase, 13, enrolled at St. Adalbert School at E. 83rd St. The 300-pupil school, which is 100% black and 80% non-Catholic, has a waiting list of 127 students.

"The Srivase that was contained in reports from his school was not the Srivase we have here," said Principal Lydia Harris. "Very incongruous."

At Halle, Srivase was allegedly throwing and kicking chairs, fighting during the bus ride across town, and "you name it," Hewlett said.

By the time he finished the sixth grade last June, he had mostly Ds, an F and some Cs as grades for the year. "I couldn't believe they would promote him," Hewlett said.

After extensive remedial work this fall, Srivase caught up with other sixth-graders at the Catholic school.

"In terms of academics, he was very below level," said his sixth-grade teacher, Eileen Teague, who spends a half-hour each day tutoring Srivase. "He can do the work, but his whole self-image was not good. We help him and all the other children see that they are very valuable as people and to see that they are all very unique and have the utmost potential to achieve."

Srivase's grades have improved so that he receives mostly As, Bs and Cs. Wearing his navy-blue uniform, tie and black shoes, he eagerly raises his hand to answer questions during English class. During lunch, he volunteers for garbage duty. He has not been disruptive.

The \$650 annual tuition poses a problem for most of the families, including Srivase's, even though the diocese provides \$100 a year from a scholarship fund for needy children.

Harris said family members often come by the school, empty change and dollar bills from their pockets or use their Social Security or welfare checks to pay. One grandmother told Harris, "Take this. I don't need to buy my blood pressure medicine this month."

Hewlett, whose income is below the poverty level, pooled money from relatives. Srivase's grandfather decided not to retire this year to help pay tuition.

Srivase and his three older sisters

live with their aunt and grandparents. Hewlett, 42, inherited the children when their mother died of an aneurysm in 1986.

"I had to take the ropes and pull these kids through because I know education is the only way," Hewlett said.

Srivase, who hopes his growing 5-foot-6-frame will give him a jump on being a college basketball player, said he was learning the importance of education at St. Adalbert.

He said a neighborhood youth recently pulled out \$600 in cash from his pocket, counting every bill to tempt Srivase. The youth said that was the kind of money Srivase could make if he wanted to deal drugs.

"I thought about all that money and what I could get with it, but I said it wasn't worth it. I knew it wasn't right," said Srivase, who wants to go college to be an electrical engineer, just in case he doesn't make it as a pro basketball player.

Srivase admits that he started fights at Halle. "They'd make fun of my name. If they said something about my mother, I would have to fight them," he said. "They'd tried to bully me. I had to defend myself."

But at Adalbert, there is no swearing among pupils, no name calling, no need to defend himself.

"It's a lot of work, but I want to bring my grades up even further," he said.

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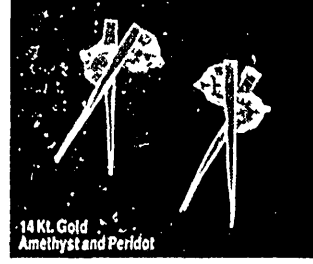
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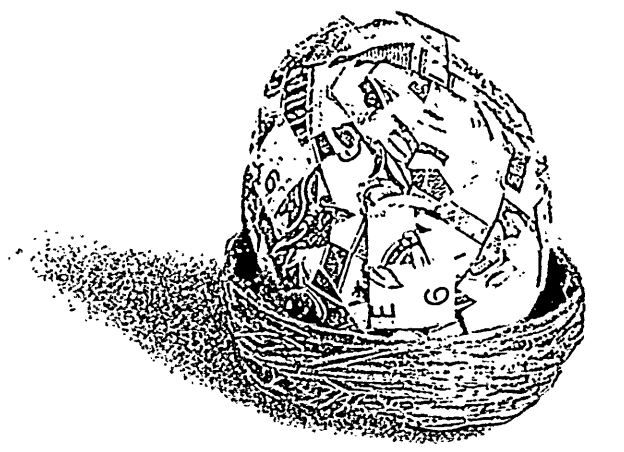
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