



Q&A

Dionis J. Rodriguez, a second-year student at Harvard Business School, was a student at the Nativity Mission School—the original Nativity school—in New York City from 1987 to 1990. After graduating from Nativity, he attended Xavier High School, and then Cornell University, where he earned a B.S. in hotel administration. He worked for six years in the hotel industry before enrolling at Harvard. Dionis has served on the board at Nativity Mission School and is currently spearheading an effort to open a Nativity-model middle school in the Dominican Republic. He is also a co-founder of Operation Link-up Alumni Association, an organization focused on developing and supporting the educational goals of inner-city high school students.

MAKING THE MOST OF AN OPPORTUNITY

A GRADUATE OF THE FIRST NATIVITY
SCHOOL REFLECTS ON
HIS EXPERIENCE

interview by George Kearney

Q As a student, what attracted you to the Nativity Mission Center?

A There were two things. First, one of my closest friends was attending the Brother Lawrence program and encouraged me to join him. The Br. Lawrence program, named after the brother who was in charge of it, was part of the Nativity application process. Prospective students went to Nativity after their respective elementary schools let out and did their homework under the supervision and guidance of Br. Lawrence. There was also time for games and sports and interaction with Nativity staff and students. It was a great way to keep us kids off the sometimes dangerous New York streets. Second, Nativity had a great reputation in the public school I was attending, and one of my teachers strongly recommended the program to my parents.

Q What are your recollections of the three years you spent at the school?

A Some of my best memories from my three years at Nativity are of Camp Montserrat, Fr. Jack Podsiadlo, and the deeply devoted teachers and staff. After the Br. Lawrence Program, the second step in the admissions process was to attend and make it through Camp Montserrat, the school's seven-week leadership training camp in Lake Placid. Camp was full of sports, activities, prayer, academics, and character building—and the camaraderie that developed still remains today.

Fr. Jack was the principal when I attended Nativity. I've always been amazed by his tenacity and his relentless efforts to help students. I've never met anyone as committed to his cause or as selfless. He led the school's emphasis on academics, leadership, and integrity. He helped students with high school and college selection and application, taught multiple subjects, managed the

school, and was in charge of fundraising. Fr. Jack was instrumental in my decisions to attend Xavier and Cornell. He actually took me to Cornell when I was a sophomore in high school as a way to motivate me to apply. I'm grateful to this day for all his blessings.

Most of my teachers at Nativity were volunteers. Some were Jesuit priests and others were young people who sought a rewarding and meaningful experience before attending graduate school or starting their careers. While they all came from different backgrounds and were headed in distinct directions, all were deeply committed to our education. They awoke in me a hunger for knowledge that is still with me to this day.

Q **What was a normal day like for students at Nativity? How were your school days different from those of your friends in the neighborhood who didn't attend Nativity?**

A Each day at Nativity was academically intensive and replete with sports and other activities. The school day started at 7:50 A.M. when students and staff assembled for attendance, announcements, and prayer. Classes were held from 8:20–3:15, with a 20 minutes recess at 10:20 and lunch around noon. To get into the cafeteria, each of us had to correctly use the Word of the Day in a sentence. This was probably where I learned most of my SAT words. Lunch allowed time for games or time to visit teachers for additional explanations of topics that were not fully grasped during class. After school activities started as soon as classes were over. There were competitive school sports—we had basketball, track, and baseball—or detention (known as J.U.G., an acronym for Justice Under God), or a study period for those students who didn't play sports.

The school day at Nativity was quite different from a typical day at other local schools. We started earlier and ended later and everything revolved around academics and good behavior. Public schools gave very little or no homework, while Nativity students had several hours worth of additional academic preparation. We also had a dress code, which most public schools didn't have.

Q **In what ways did your three years at Nativity prepare you for the rest of your education—college prep high school, college, and graduate school?**

A Nativity offered an excellent education. Teachers were deeply committed and were always available for help and to mentor us by giving advice on academics and life. To these volunteers, teaching at Nativity was not a job but an opportunity to make a difference in the lives of some students. My eighth grade math teacher, a mathematician named Mr. Cullen, taught us pre-calculus. I was so advanced in math that I didn't learn much from ninth, tenth, or eleventh grade in one of the best private high schools in New York City. Their passion and dedication was immense and I was touched by their efforts. They made me believe that I could accomplish anything and constantly challenged me to

do better. From them, I learned the importance of education, goal setting and academic discipline. I have successfully used what they taught me while in high school, college, and now for my graduate degree. Nativity is the cause of all my academic accomplishments.

Q **How, if at all, did your Nativity experience prepare you for life beyond college?**

A A Catholic and Jesuit school, Nativity instilled in me values that will be with me forever. Fr. Jack used to say that we had to be "Nativity Boys" in and outside of school. Well, after being a Nativity Boy for three years and staying involved with the school since I graduated, I consider myself a "Nativity Man" as I continue to try to live in the Nativity way. Jesuit education provided me with a different perspective. I share the Jesuits' desire to impact the world and feel I have a responsibility to pass on these values.

Q **Chicago Jesuit Academy is now one of forty-four schools modeled after your alma mater, the Nativity Mission School. Why do you think the Nativity model of education has been so successful?**

A I believe that the Nativity model has been so successful because it provides a transformational experience at a critical time. Middle school is probably the last opportunity to impact most youth's academic discipline. New students at Nativity are met with the most rigorous academic curriculum they have ever faced. They're challenged daily, expected and encouraged to be at their best behavior. Existing students are taught to be role models for new students and to show them the ropes. They're taught right from wrong in and out of the classroom. The longer school day, small classes, passionate teachers, summer camp, and Jesuit character are the reasons for the success of the Nativity model.

Q **Why have you decided to become involved with efforts to open a Nativity-model school in the Dominican Republic?**

A I have benefited greatly from Nativity and want others to have the same opportunity. The Nativity model provides an educational parachute to youths that are trapped in the cycle of poverty. A Nativity-like school in the Dominican Republic would open doors to poor kids that they can only dream of. It would give them a shot at success. Right now, only the wealthy can access the expensive private education in the Dominican Republic. Nativity can provide even better education for free, thanks to the caring people, companies, and foundations that have supported Nativity schools throughout the years. Furthermore, I believe that Nativity graduates have a responsibility of living out the school's motto; "An opportunity is Nativity's gift to you. What you do with that opportunity is your gift to Nativity." ■