

## North Cambridge Catholic High School To Move To Dorchester

On December 22, 2009, the Archdiocese of Boston announced that North Cambridge Catholic High School (NCCHS) will relocate to the former St. William School, 100 Savin Hill Avenue in Dorchester, MA, for the 2010-11 school year.

For the Archdiocese of Boston press release, please [click here](#).

### Work & Success: An Unusual Relationship at North Cambridge Catholic High School



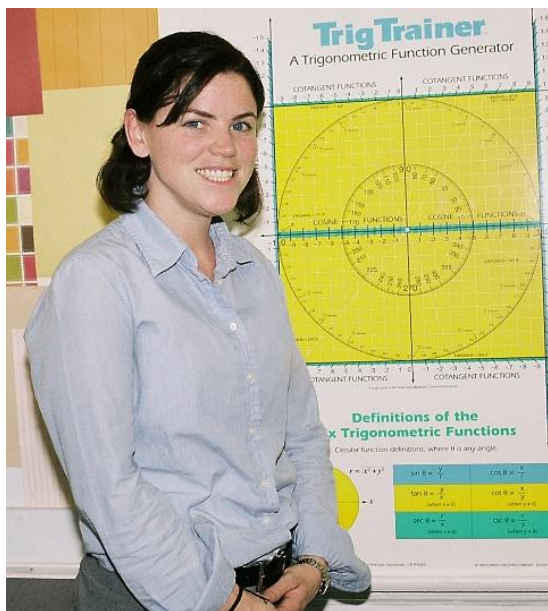
**Junior Mauricio Acosta, Director of Admissions Marcos Enrique, junior Kati Fernandez and junior Deidra Lofton**

Katuska (“Kati”) Fernandez, a bubbly 15-year-old junior at North Cambridge Catholic High School, goes to school four days a week. On the fifth day, she works. This year her work-study job is at Newton-Wellesley Hospital, where she greets patients and files patient records. “What I love about this school is that it helps you figure out what you want to study in college and do with your life,” says Fernandez. “My goal is to become a pediatrician or a psychiatrist.”

NCC is no ordinary school. For the past six years, all of its students have worked one school day out of every five, and the money they’ve earned has helped pay their tuitions and support the school. The school is one of two “Cristo Rey” schools in the Archdiocese of Boston (the other is Notre Dame High School in Lawrence) and belongs to a network of two dozen Cristo Rey schools nationwide –

schools shaped by a vision of some Chicago Jesuits and lay leaders that low-income students could flourish academically and socially by participating in a unique work-study program.

Ninety-three percent of NCC's students are Latino and African-American. Students must be income eligible to attend the school, resulting in an average family income of \$35,000 for a family of four. "This school prepares students with limited means for college and for life, which is very unusual," says Father Jose Medina, NCC's youthful principal – he's 40 – and a math teacher at the school. "Many of our students become the first generation of their families to go to college."



**"There's someone willing to fight for every kid at this school," says NCC math teacher Jill McHugh.**

Students who otherwise would not be able to afford a college preparatory education find a unique sense of acceptance at NCC, says Jill McHugh, 28, who is head of the math department and oversees the math remediation afterschool program. "Here the students are supported while pushed toward excellence," she says. "There's someone willing to fight for every kid at this school."

McHugh came to NCC as a volunteer teacher with Boston College's Urban Catholic Teacher Corps seven years ago – and never left. (Her commitment to the school was for two years, the amount of time it took her to earn a Master of Education degree at BC.) "I stay at NCC for the kids," McHugh says simply. "I'm always amazed by how much they've overcome, by how determined they are and how honest they are in their emotions."

**Founded in 1921** and based in its current location since 1957, NCC had been grappling with under-enrollment, a shortage of funds and possible closure less than a decade ago. But once Father Medina, then-Principal Sister Ellen Powers, CSJ, and former Lt. Governor Thomas P. O'Neill III convinced the Cristo Rey Network that NCC would be a worthy addition to the Network, everything began to turn around for the school. Converted to a Cristo Rey school in 2004, NCC now has partnerships – financial and otherwise – with just about every well-known private, public and nonprofit organization in Greater Boston.

O'Neill '62, chair of the board of directors at NCC and son of two of NCC's most famous alumni – Tip O'Neill and his wife Millie – is credited with making NCC's transition to a Cristo Rey school a reality. (Most Cristo Rey schools are start up schools.) "This model helps defray about 70 percent of the cost of [students'] education," he told the *Boston Business Journal* recently. "The students are actually

helping pay the teachers' salaries." O'Neill also noted that his staffers at his public relations firm, O'Neil and Associates, tutor NCC student-workers and attend their school events.

Here's how NCC's Corporate Work Study Program works. Four students share one full-time, entry-level job and work a different day each week. (They rotate working on the fifth day.) On the days students are in school, they take rigorous college-prep courses – and go for after-school tutoring if they are not performing at grade level. On the day they work, students put in eight hours at their job – whether it's at a law firm, a business, a nonprofit or some other organization – and they must be on time, dressed appropriately, and able to meet high expectations.



**Ferlis Medina, Lucas Chacon, and Larissa Barbosa listen intently in junior chemistry class. They must meet academic demands and work demands.**

For the students, the rewards are both immediate and long-term. Kedist Abreha, 17 and a senior, worked for the same business law firm – Goulston & Storrs – her freshman, sophomore and junior years. “As a freshman I was just doing filing, but then as a sophomore, I updated the computer and had other responsibilities,” she says. “As a junior, I was opening and closing files for the lawyers and sending the files to Iron Mountain for storage.” Abreha, whose family hails from Ethiopia, also believes that having a formal job in the work place

from the age of 14 gives her and her classmates advantages over their non-working peers. “We know how to act in the workplace and talk to our supervisors in a proper way,” she says. “It makes us more mature.” Now working with children at St. Catherine's School in Somerville, Abreha wants a career in psychology and neuroscience that involves either children or prison inmates.

**Being a student** at NCC is not for the faint of heart, says Jeff Thielman, the school's new president. He points out that freshman arrive at the school in early August for work-study training and academic testing and their upper class peers arrive just a couple of weeks later; the school year goes until late June. More than half of the freshman students are currently in remediation classes, particularly in math.

“These are good kids who want to make it, but who in some instances are from very challenging backgrounds,” says Thielman, who once served as a lay Jesuit volunteer in Peru and has a long history of involvement with the Cristo Rey Network. “We've had kids who live in homeless shelters, who live with their grandparents or other relatives, and who have been wards of the states. By giving them a

chance to prepare for college and to rub elbows with professionals in the work place, they gain a better sense of what they can do with their lives.”

Having dedicated teachers at NCC makes a difference. Dan Horgan, 30, who graduated from the University of Hartford and is in his second year of teaching English at NCC, doesn't mind that he's making nearly \$10,000 less at NCC than he did at his previous teaching job in a public school. “What makes NCC different from other schools I've taught in is how passionate and dedicated the staff is about the school,” he says. “Everyone at NCC works together for the same cause. No student falls through the cracks.”

NCC's small size means that teachers and staff know the students and their families, according to Carrie Gilmore, 35, who has degrees from Yale and Wesleyan University and is in her 9<sup>th</sup> year as an English and history teacher at the school. “NCC is a very satisfying place to teach because going above and beyond is the norm here,” she says. “Students have a much clearer sense of purpose about their education here than at other schools, so it's easier to hold them to high standards.”

NCC's four-year college acceptance rate increased to 91 percent in 2008 from 27 percent in 2005. Notes Father Medina, the NCC principal: “In four years of high school, our students will have each worked a full year while also taking intensive college-prep courses. That gives the students an advantage because they are building impressive resumes while paying their way through school.”

Thanks to NCC, student Kati Fernandez thinks about college all the time – and her dream of becoming a doctor doesn't seem so far away.

***By Catherine Walsh***

*For more information on North Cambridge Catholic, please visit their website at <http://www.myncchs.org/>.*

*Note*

*On December 23, 2009, the Boston Globe ran a story titled, “Trek to Catholic school to ease for some: Cambridge school moving to Dorchester.” To read the entire article, please [click here](#).*