



# The Catholic Key

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## News

### Waris awards honor exemplary service

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Kevin Kelly/Key photo

*Patty Waris, wife of the late Bill Waris and second from right, joins Bill Waris Award winners Ashley Klein and Jim and Charlotte Humphrey at the annual St. Thomas More Parish Souper Bowl Feb. 6.*

KANSAS CITY — Two-thirds of the children who are not proficient in reading by the fourth grade will end up on welfare or in prison.

That's a statistic that Jerry

McEvoy can't do anything about. But he and the staff at the Upper Room, housed at St. Louis Parish near Swope Park, can certainly change reading proficiency.

A Johns Hopkins University evaluation of the Upper Room's summer and after-school reading programs told McEvoy and the professionals and volunteers who work with neighborhood children to improve their reading skills something that they already knew.

It works, McEvoy told more than 100 people who came to St. Thomas More Parish's Souper Bowl dinner Feb. 6, the

eve of the NFL's Super Bowl.

"In eight weeks, our students gained a full academic year in reading," McEvoy said.

He gave credit to the children.

"They did it the old-fashioned way. They worked their fannies off," McEvoy said.

McEvoy, himself a St. Thomas More parishioner, was the featured speaker at the annual parish event that also honored three parishioners for outstanding service with the Bill Waris Award.

The award is named for the former parishioner, Jackson County executive, school principal and college basketball coach who was an icon of service to the poor until his death in 2007. The 2010 awards went to Jim and Charlotte Humphrey and to Ashley Klein.

McEvoy has been the Upper Room's director since it began offering after-school and summer reading programs in 1999.

He said he was recruited by Father Don Farnan, then pastor of St. Louis Parish, to raise money to launch the program, and he hasn't left. Father Farnan is now pastor at St. Thomas More Parish.

McEvoy said the Upper Room is guided by a straightforward principle: "Every child should have a right to a good education."

And the price is high for not providing a quality education to every child, he said.

"What do most prison inmates have in common?" McEvoy asked. "Seventy-five percent of them can't read. They are functionally illiterate. There is at least some evidence of causality between the degree of illiteracy and the degree of criminality."

When children who can't read become adults who can't read, their options are few, McEvoy said.

"If you can't read, you can't get a job. If you don't have a

job, there are very few things left in life. The options are all bad,” he said.

A life of crime or a life on welfare “either way, the cost is picked up by the taxpayer,” he said.

McEvoy cited statistics from California that indicate the state will spend \$7 billion annually on its higher education system, and \$10 billion on its prison system.

“There are some strong economic reasons for teaching children how to read well and read early,” he said.

And the Upper Room’s childhood literacy programs prove that children in the “inner city” are just as capable of learning as children in the suburbs.

“Yes, we’ve got an education problem, but it isn’t the kids,” McEvoy said.

“The primary determinants of success in school are the income level of the parents and the education level of the parents,” he said. “High poverty kids lose out on both counts.”

McEvoy said that the children predominantly come from single-parent households headed by a mother with less than a high school education. Ninety-five percent of them qualify for free school lunches, a measure of poverty.

“There are no books in the home. They are exposed to an extremely low vocabulary in the house,” he said. “They come into first grade well behind their counterparts in the suburbs.”

But even if they are poor and under-educated, the mothers who send their children to the Upper Room all dream of a better life for their children, McEvoy said.

Initially marshalling the forces of a handful of Christian churches along the Swope Parkway corridor, the Upper Room program now involves some 22 churches helping to teach more than 2,500 in its summer program and 1,300 children in its after-school program.

Volunteer tutors willing to give one hour a week reading

with the children are the key, he said.

“We’ve run our independent reading programs without tutors and did well,” McEvoy said. “It works better with tutors.”

“Tutors can close that achievement gap and turn kids onto a path to education,” he said.

“We need tutors,” he said. “And I think it’s fair to say that Bill Waris, with his background in education and his can-do spirit, would be leading this effort today.”

Parish pastoral associate David Butel said that the award recipients reflect both the spirit of Bill Waris and the spirit of St. Thomas More Parish.

Klein, the youth award winner, worked some 250 hours babysitting and gave all the money earned to purchase 50 baby dressers and newborn clothes for expectant mothers who came for help at the Advice and Aid Pregnancy Center.

In addition, she has been tutoring kindergarten students at Holy Name School in the Archdiocese of Kansas City, Kan., and conducted two bake sales at her high school, Notre Dame de Sion where she is a senior, to raise money to purchase books for the kindergarteners.

Klein is also active in People to People, raising money for school supplies for children in Fiji, and also works with Down Syndrome children.

As she received her award, Klein broke into tears recalling the pro-life retreat she attended as an eighth grader.

“I was just so moved by what teen-aged mothers have to go through,” she said. “Just thinking about them, I have seen myself grow with each organization I have helped.”

The Humphreys not only inspired Tom Turner, executive director of the Bishop Sullivan Center, to launch the ElderCool program that provides free room air conditioners to Kansas City’s poor and disabled, they provided the seed donation to get the program going.

Since the program’s inception in 1999, summer heat deaths

among Kansas City's elderly poor and disabled have plummeted.

In addition, the Humphreys provided a foster home to 75 children waiting adoption, served hot meals to the poor at the Holy Family Catholic Worker House and St. James Place, have continued to volunteer at the Bishop Sullivan Center and the Seton Center, and serve the parish as lectors, sacristans, extraordinary ministers of the Eucharist, on RCIA teams and in the engaged couples ministry.

"I am somewhat disappointed," quipped Jim, as he accepted his award. "I thought we were going to get the youth award."

Charlotte recalled the couple's "very dear friend," Bill Waris, and said it was an honor to receive the award named for him.

"Thanks to God and this parish that we can belong to St. Thomas More," she said.

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