

Journey with Our Students in Public Schools: Mentor Ministry

by Ingrid E. Sánchez-Seymour

As a young, bilingual, hyphenated Cuban-American kid growing up in Miami in the 70's and 80's, trying to fit in was difficult. We first-generation kids were told we were different, but the same as our school peers. We spoke two languages, lived a life at school in English, lived a Cuban life at home and navigated the in-between. Often we'd be at a loss in looking for someone who shared our experience, or even cared about our experience at home, at school and in-between.

As a kid, *Welcome Back Kotter* was one of my favorite TV shows. Google it. It's a show about a sassy, former mis-fit teacher who returns to his old high school to give back; to be a positive, guiding influence to a group of rowdy, sassy, mis-fit students called the Sweathogs – a group he was once in too. The show still holds up to today's classroom experience. Here was the real power of the show for me: the classroom was filled with students of color, ethnic backgrounds and lots of belonging issues. Mr. Kotter, with his sassy-ness and unorthodox pedagogy, would now be considered innovative, fresh and, wait for it, a mentor. The show was never about what the kids learned academically; it was about how Mr. Kotter entered the students' experience so he could guide, walk with and offer a sage word or two. He never expected to be thanked or liked. He was called to walk with his kids, so they could succeed in life. Powerful stuff for a 70's show. Powerful stuff for a pre-teen, first-generation kid in Miami looking to navigate a hyphenated world.

Mr. Kotter was a mentor. A mentor is defined as a trusted counselor or guide, a positive, guiding influence in a young person's life. The word *mentor* comes directly from Homer's epic *The Odyssey*. In this classic story, our hero Odysseus embarks on a 20 year journey and entrusts his son Telemachus to the care of his trusted friend, Mentor. Being a mentor in our public schools gives us the privilege of journeying with a teen who may be in distress, in need of an objective listener, or in need of a positive, guiding adult presence.

Two years ago, I asked the principal of my local high school HOW I could come in to meet with my church kids, much like our beloved Brian Kissinger did at his local high school. Funny, it was the same principal – so he said, come on in! Did that sound too easy? After two years of trying to make something happen, yes, it did seem a little too easy. But the Holy Spirit was all over it, so I started to visit during lunch time in the lunchroom on the first and third Wednesdays of the month. Over the course of the year, every pun intended, I mustered up my game face to enter the battlefield. You remember high school? It's just as scary as a full grown, tax-paying adult. Who the heck was I to walk in on their territory? I prayed to our Holy Mother Mary and walked in with my Nativity hoodie and a smile on my face.

Over the course of that year I learned plenty about our public school and our students:

Lesson one: **Know your Adult Staff.** If the Adult Staff know you and trust you, you become part of the family. As youth ministers, we often take for granted that adults have all the control over a teens' life; especially at school. Teachers, counselors, office staff, and security personnel all stand between you and meeting "your" kids. I learned that by engaging the office staff and security personnel they would know me too. We talked, shared a quick story or two and off I went to the lunchroom. Those stories were important because staff and faculty are part of a student's life too. It got to the point where staff would ask me if I worked there. They would come to me in the

lunchroom and ask what time Masses were (yup, lots of Catholics in our schools), and a few times, asked me to step into a situation in the role of “helpful adult”. Occasionally, I’d get a freebie to the football games because – you’re the lady that comes in every week, right? Lesson one: *Earning your street cred* with those in charge allows you the privilege of being in the school, and abiding with students and staff at the school. That’s great ministry.

Lesson two: **Knowledge is Power**. After a year of having grace-filled access to the school, a new principal came into the picture. I asked him for an interview to find out if he was open to a youth minister coming into his school. Again, PRAYER! The short story is that he had heard about my wanderings at the school and thought that my presence could be an asset. He heard about me from the teachers and staff (see lesson one). I let him know I wanted to be at the school to be a presence for “my” kids and a resource in case they needed help. I learned from him that FCPS really wants caring adults to be a caring presence to students in need. Throughout the year, I said hello to my kids, and had heart-to-heart talks with teens who sat alone at lunch. Good ministry? I think so. How did mentoring affect the way I did youth ministry? It allowed me a glimpse into the life of a student. I could see them having lunch in the hallways in groups or alone. I knew the location of their sub-school, the library, the counseling office. I knew the security guards, the front office staff and the counselors. I saw the club flyers and secular affirmations on the walls. I could see the confluence of athletes, loners, popular kids, teachers, and staff. I heard the sound of the class bell. I was on their turf and could better listen to their experience of school.

Lesson Three: **Know that YOU are needed**. As youth ministers, we want to be with our teens and witness to them. This is our job in our parishes when we attend a sports or theatrical event. As a mentor, you are assigned a young person who needs your whole attention and neutral point of view. Translation - the mentor is NOT the teacher or parent, a mentor offers the teen a safe space to talk, vent, and un-package. You may be able to ask for a teen you know. The space is the same. Mentors are needed to offer the ministry of presence at school. Mentors don’t need to talk about the faith because we represent the best of what the Gospels offer: faith, hope and love. Mentors are available to be seen by their teens in the hallways. Mentors are seen by staff and faculty as partner in the journey that is high school. My favorite moments are when a teen walks by me in a crowded hallway and shouts – “Hey, that’s Ms. Ingrid!” Teen 2 asks, “Who’s that”? Teen 1 says, “That’s my youth minister”. Teen 2 says, “How do you know her”? Let the evangelization begin.

I encourage my fellow Directors of Youth Ministry to consider the ministry of mentoring in our high schools. Be the light for a young person in need. Go after that one sheep. Offer a smile, or a high five in the hallway to those you know, and those you may get to know. Journey with a teen, just like Mr. Kotter did. He cared because he knew. We are called to mentor because we know we are called to love. Why? Because Jesus first loved us, 1 John 4:19.

Ingrid E. Sánchez-Seymour, better known as mom or Ms. Ingrid was born in the Archdiocese of Miami. She came to DC for college and to change the world. After meeting and marrying Jim, she established herself as a Virginian by marriage - and by the grace of God, so are her three kids. She thought she'd be a diplomat but God had another path for her - youth ministry- which she's been doing since 2002. In her not so free time, she likes to hang out with friends and binge watch worthy shows on Netflix. A life-long, proud Catholic, she hopes to teach the love of Christ to her family, neighbors and her parish community.