

PROVIDENCE-ST. MEL:

THE SCHOOL THAT REFUSED TO DIE

Students, staff and parents save an institution

BY RON HARRIS

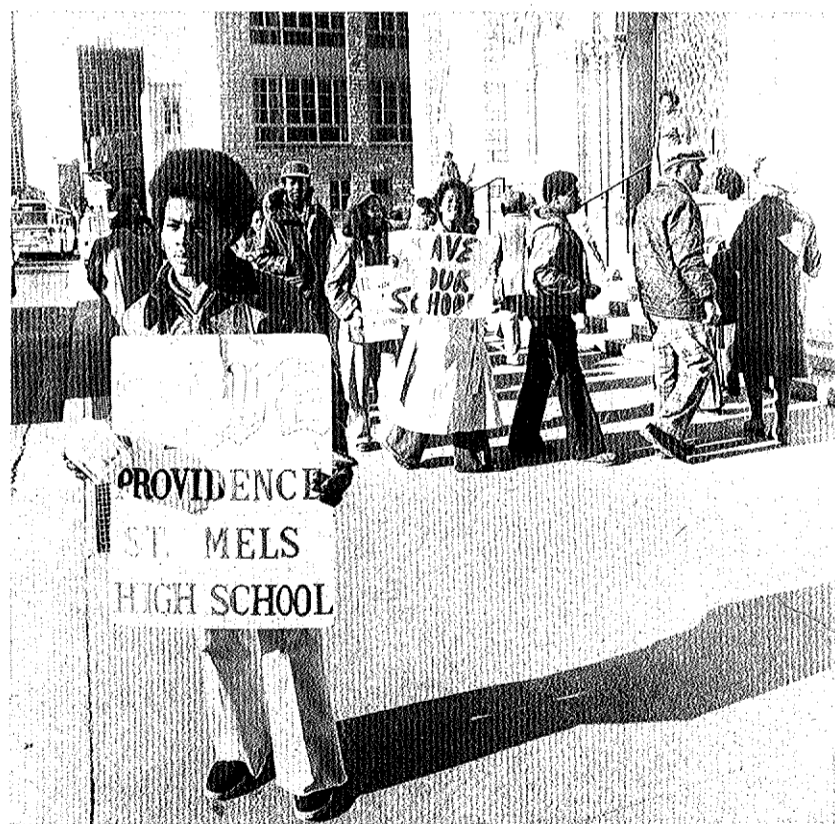
PROVIDENCE-St. Mel High School stands amid the squalor of Chicago's West Side as an educational oasis in the midst of a learning desert. Surrounding the five-story, Gothic structure are crumbling buildings, many being held together by little more than the dreams of those yearning to escape the neighborhood's despair. Every type of drug and 126 bars can be found nearby, unemployment runs to 40 percent, and half the family incomes are below the federal poverty level.

But inside Providence-St. Mel, a learning experience takes place that is equaled by few schools in America, and probably by none functioning in a similar environment. In the last six years, 85 percent of the school's graduates have gone to college, and that impressive figure jumps to 95 percent for the past three years. Though violence and terror are part of the daily routine in the surrounding neighborhood, none exists in the confines of the predominately Black school. There are no drugs in the hall, no spray-can graffiti on the walls,

no locks on school equipment or classroom doors.

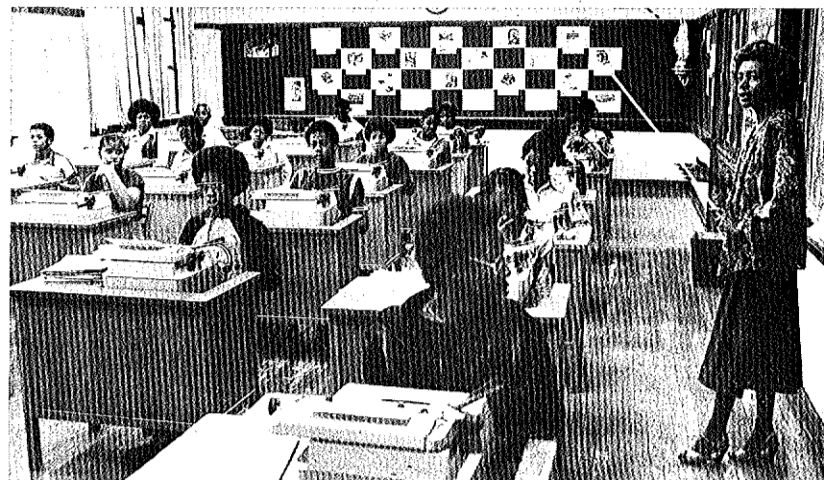
Providence-St. Mel may well be the most remarkable high school in the country. But despite its record of academic excellence and good student deportment, the 49-year-old institution's existence was seriously threatened this year. On Holy Thursday, three days before Easter, the Chicago Archdiocese, the largest Catholic diocese in the U.S. and possibly the richest in the world, told principal Paul Adams it would no longer fund the once all-White school. A number of reasons were listed, including one that the school had failed to raise enough money besides that provided by the archdiocese (although the school had increased outside funding from \$10,000 to \$100,000 since 1973 when the archdiocese first threatened to close the institution unless outside funding was increased). Adams literally begged church officials to reconsider, but they refused. So, last June, the doors of the school were closed, supposedly forever. But they

The fierce determination of staff, students and parents that enabled Providence-St. Mel to buck the mighty Chicago Archdiocese and stay alive is reflected in the faces of school principal Paul Adams and his students (left) standing in front of the 49-year-old institution. Students (right) joined with parents and staff to raise money to save the school.





The movie *Cooley High* was filmed at Providence-St. Mel when Chicago's real Cooley High School proved unsuitable for filming. High schoolers (above, left) played by (l. to r.) Corin Rogers, Glynn Turman, Maurice Leon Havis and Lawrence-Hilton Jacobs were a far cry from real-life students (right) who are seriously interested in school work.



"They seem so dedicated to learning," marveled an advisor with the Wisconsin State Department after observing the students in class. Students (left) busily jot down chemistry homework assignment while typing instructor Diane Sawyer (right), one of the school's 16 teachers, explains the fingering on typewriter keyboard to her class.

THE SCHOOL THAT REFUSED TO DIE *Continued*

didn't stay closed. Parents, teachers and students wouldn't let them. In a massive, four-month fund-raising effort, the staff, students, parents and friends of the embattled institution raised \$160,000—enough to run the school for one year—and on Sept. 5, Providence-St. Mel welcomed 300 students through its doors. The school had refused to die.

That the school could triumph over seemingly insurmountable odds is astonishing. The key to the victory is an extension of an old-fashioned philosophy which guides the remarkable educational process going on inside the gray stone building. "We're always telling our students to try a little harder, to go that extra mile," Principal Adams explains while leaning back in a chair in his spartan office. "So, here comes this thing laying right in our lap that we're not going to be funded next year. We just started practicing what we preach."

And practice they did. First, Adams set the record straight. "When the guy from the archdiocese told me we were going to close, I told him right then and there that we were *not* going to close," Adams says. "He told me I should tell the faculty, and I said, 'You tell them, because as far as I'm concerned we are *not* going to close.' There were enough teachers, parents and students here with enough guts for us to fight this come hell or high water—with the grace of God, because we sure didn't have any money. I was out of town when it broke in the newspapers that we were going to be closed. First thing I did when I got back to Chicago was call an assembly. I told the students quite simply that we had no plans to close. I told them, 'This school will be open next year and we will look forward to seeing you.'"

Next item on the agenda was to make those bold statements stand up by raising the funds needed to continue the school. A corporation, Providence-St. Mel Inc., was formed and \$25,000 was raised in short order with a rally advertised in the Chicago Sun-Times. Another \$25,000 came from Bankers Life & Casualty, and Thompson Distributors, a Black firm in Chicago, kicked in \$20,000. A full-page advertisement in *The Wall Street Journal* headlined, "340 Kids Are About To Learn Hard

Work Isn't Worth A Damn," netted additional funds from businesses.

But most of the money came from ordinary, working class people, some from as far away as Maine, California, Puerto Rico and Belgium. "It was the average people who kept us going," Adams points out. "Sure, we got some big donations from businesses, but it was people mailing in \$5, \$15, or \$50 that allowed us to be here. They would send a letter and it would say something like, 'I don't have much money, but I like what you're doing. Here's \$20.' Stuff like that kept us going."

The survival of Providence-St. Mel says a lot about the people who wanted to see it continue, but it also says a great deal about the school's academic program. Without its record of scholastic achievement it would have merely been one of many Black inner-city schools short of funds—hardly a unique position.

But Providence-St. Mel is unique. While most high schools today are grappling with problems of lack of discipline and falling grades, the school seems to have already found the solution. Adams says the key is not a new educational technique, just the use of simple common sense.

"We're not doing anything magical here," he says rather matter-of-factly. "The only thing we're doing is using common sense. We know that in order to achieve it takes hard work. We expect our students to work hard, and they *have* to work hard if they want to get out of here. We are here for the children to learn. If a class is not learning, you need to fire the teacher. If the school is not progressing, fire the principal. You do whatever it takes to get that child to learn." Combined with Adams' common sense approach are some straight and fast, no-nonsense rules. For instance:

- If anyone is found smoking marijuana anywhere on the school's property, every student in the immediate vicinity is out. Not democratic, but effective. Peer pressure has eliminated drugs at the school.
- If a student cuts one class, the student is fined \$10 and is suspended. In order to be reinstated, the student must return to school with his or her parents.

