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A cheer from the Bronx

Joe Ferullo | May. 28, 2009 NCR Today

Sonia Sotomayor went to the same high school I would?ve gone to. Except my mother was determined to keep me away from girls.

The newly-minted Supreme Court nominee graduated from Cardinal Spellman High School, just a few blocks from my house on Grace Avenue in the Baychester section of The Bronx. If you were smart, ambitious, and wanted to go to (a co-ed) Catholic high school in my part of the city, Cardinal Spellman was the place.

My mother pushed me (gently) toward Fordham Prep, the Jesuit-run all boys? school on the Fordham University campus, closer to Sotomayor?s home in the South Bronx. (This is how that happened: when I was about 10 years old, Fr. Eugene at my parish asked me if I ever thought about joining the priesthood. With my mother beaming next to me, I answered: ?No. I like girls too much.? Fr. Gene laughed, but Mom?s face beam dropped like a stone. I am sure that was the day she decided an all-boys school was the right road for me.)

Both schools were excellent academically, and affordable for the working class families that still fill The Bronx. When I graduated from Fordham Prep in 1975, tuition was a substantial yet manageable $1,400 a year. Spellman was about half that. The schools were tough, rigorous, and disciplined ? they were the most effective anti-poverty programs in my neighborhood.

Today, Spellman basks in the pride [1]of Sotomayor?s Supreme Court nomination. Even the official White House website makes special note of her Catholic education [2]: Blessed Sacrament for grammar school; Spellman as precursor to Princeton and Yale.

While hers is a remarkable story, it is special only in degree, not type. From Spellman, Fordham Prep, and other Catholic schools, Bronx kids found doors open at places like Yale, Harvard, Columbia, Georgetown, and M.I.T. My parents never let me worry how they were going to pay for college ? they were too stunned to see me apply to universities that did not even enter the vocabulary of blue collar families from streets like Grace Avenue, or the projects that were home to Sotomayor.

But you know the turn this story is about to take. Catholic schools, the seed and soil for generations of determined kids and their parents, are in big trouble ? perhaps nowhere more so than in New York. According to one report [3], forty percent of Catholic schools in Brooklyn and Queens have shut down since 2002. That directly affects the upward mobility of families like Sotomayor?s and mine.
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To save more money, the Archdiocese of New York announced in January that ten high schools it owns and operates will now each be financially independent. According to the New York Times [4], the schools can ?no longer depend on the diocese? for financial help.

Because this is how these stories always go, it will come as no surprise to learn that Cardinal Spellman is one of those ten high schools. As the Times noted, ?a large portion of the enrollment (at Spellman) is made up of black and Hispanic students from the city?s poorest neighborhoods.? The low, Archdiocese-subsidized tuition that

allowed Sotomayor?s single-parent working-mother to afford that education is in severe jeopardy.

Sonia Sotomayor?s nomination is a great day for Catholic education, and for its mission to provide poor students true opportunity. But remember: every June, these schools have similarly great days, miraculous days, as they graduate seniors from families of modest means, and send them off to the nation?s best colleges and universities. How many more great days lay ahead is the awful, whispered, desperate question raised by the triumph of Sonia Sotomayor.

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[1] http://blogs.usatoday.com/ondeadline/2009/05/sotomayors-high-school-buzzing-over-supreme-court-pick-.html
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