

Posted on Sun, Nov. 14, 2004

NORTH MIAMI-DADE

Pace High receives national recognition

A North Dade Catholic school is tapped as one of the 50 best in the United States by a national organization.

By **IVETTE DOBARGANES**
U/Miami News Service

November for the Interact Mission Service Club at Monsignor Edward Pace High School typically is when the group collects canned goods in its "Tons of Love" project. The goods are shipped to Haiti free of charge by Brothers to the Rescue.

This year, a destructive hurricane season in Haiti spurred students to increase their caring and giving. Interact put the student body up to a challenge: Start the drive earlier, during homecoming at the beginning of the school year and raise even more goods for Haiti's hurricane victims. Homecoming week alone, the student body came up with five tons of food that the Brothers to the Rescue already has flown to Haiti, said Elva Rigoza, the school's advancement director.

The school is still collecting goods and at Mass the day before Thanksgiving students will count up more tons to send over, Rigoza said.

The food collection is part of Pace High's outreach to the island. Through *Amor en Acción* -- Love in Action -- a nonprofit organization that works in Haiti, Pace High each year raises money to pay the salaries of teachers at two schools on the island.

Interact Club members set a goal for the student body to raise \$20,000 to pay the 15 teachers who staff the schools in Moulen and Pewou in Haiti. The money ensures each teacher is paid \$1,300 per year. It is raised by efforts driven by the service club, but the entire student body gets involved, and parents and alumni also make donations, Rigoza said.

The school's demonstrated commitment to community is among reasons it recently was recognized as one of the best 50 Catholic secondary schools in America. And students, faculty, parents and alumni have been in a celebratory mode since getting the news last month.

"Those of us who work here know that this is a very special place. We have very special people here, and the kids are wonderful -- but it's nice when people outside recognize it also," said Ana Garcia, Pace High's principal.

The Catholic High School Honor Roll, which issued the recognition, was initiated this year by the Acton Institute, a research organization based in Grand Rapids, Mich. that studies education. The Honor Roll is an independent program of the institute run by an advisory board of professors and Catholic figures, said John Couretas, communications manager at Acton. All the nation's 1,215 Catholic high schools were invited to apply and about 250 responded, Couretas said. From those, 50 schools were selected for the honor.

Other area schools picked for the recognition are Christopher Columbus High in West Miami-Dade and St. Thomas Aquinas in Fort Lauderdale.

Pace High, 15600 NW 32nd Ave., was founded in 1961 and is one of 13 Catholic high schools of the Archdiocese of Miami in Miami-Dade and Broward areas. The Pace High's 1,700 students represent a variety of ethnic groups, Garcia said. About 25 percent receive financial aid that helps pay the school's \$7,100 annual tuition.

Maisha Champagne, 17, took advantage of that aid and works summers at the school.

"I narrowed my choice down between Chaminade Madonna High School and Pace, and I felt that the cultural diversity, along with the financial aid, here were very important," said Maisha, whose sister also graduated from Pace.

The school's sense of family is what attracts students and staff, many in the Pace community say. Twenty-five alumni teach at the school, and many students, like Maisha, say their siblings either attended or currently go to the school.

Jason Tynes, class of 1999, said his brother, who graduated in 1997, was the main reason he chose Pace. But, looking back, he also credits the overall excellence of the school.

"The teachers are very personable, allowing for a good learning environment," said Tynes, 23, a military contractor. Teachers are not afraid to call students' homes, if needed, to keep up their performance.

Tynes said he was glad to hear about the school's inclusion on the Catholic High School Honor Roll.

"It must have been their ongoing dedication to excellence in and out of the classroom," Tynes said. It is a school, he said, where he knew

about 97 percent of his classmates by name.

Like many other parents who have attended Pace, Hugo Fernandez, an associate professor of medicine in hematology and oncology at the University of Miami's Sylvester Cancer Center, has kept the alma mater in the family. His son Brian graduated in 2004, and his other child Alexandra is now a sophomore.

Even Principal Garcia is a Pace graduate, class of 1980. Her daughter Jenise graduated from Pace in 2003, and her son Bryan is a junior.

Garcia said the family atmosphere helps students excel in a rigorous academic program that offers 11 advanced placement and 20 honors classes.

Last year, Pace students were awarded \$7.8 million in scholarships and were accepted to universities that included Duke, Rutgers, the University of Miami and the United States Air Force Academy.

Academic excellence is among several areas the Catholic Honor Roll judges consider in selecting schools for the Top 50 list. Other areas include civic involvement and Catholic identity.

Pace is not new to prestigious recognitions, however. In April 2003, the school was recognized among the state's top private high schools by Florida Monthly Magazine and was also picked as a Blue Ribbon Schools Program National School of Excellence, Garcia said.

The Blue Ribbon Schools program, run by the U.S. Department of Education, recognizes schools that are academically superior in their state or demonstrate dramatic gains in student performance and achievement.

Pace holds several school-wide Masses a month and offers a pastoral ministry class that is in charge of organizing Mass for the school and running the Campus Ministry events and retreats, Garcia said. Four religious retreats are mandatory for the students by the time they graduate.