

Building Hope:

A Profile of Arrupe Jesuit High School



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A Day at Arrupe Jesuit High School

*Kelly Thomas,
Developmental
Specialist*



Rene, Student



It's an uncharacteristically chilly, damp Wednesday morning in Denver. Gray clouds hang over the city, a cold drizzle falling quietly on crawling traffic. On the western side of Colorado's waking metropolis, hundreds of high school students splash through steadily growing puddles and duck into a large building nestled into a residential area. The sign out front says Arrupe Jesuit High School. I know that this relatively small high school of roughly 370 students is part of the nationwide Cristo Rey Network of Catholic college preparatory high schools, and that it is one of the most unique schools in the state in terms of both its mission and its innovative Corporate Work Study Program (CWSP). Yet to me, it looks like any other high school. I pause briefly by the sign out front, shift my briefcase on my shoulder, and follow the kids inside. I'm here to profile the school and its work by shadowing one of its students as part of an ongoing project. I have no idea what I'm in for.

Inside, I'm greeted by an energetic, cheerful young woman named Kelly Thomas, a development specialist for the school. Kelly catches me up on the day's itinerary as she escorts me briskly to a classroom on the southern end of the building. I'm late, and class is about to start. Kelly briefly introduces me to Rene, a 17-year-old Hispanic junior whom I will be following for the day. Rene is a smiling, somewhat shy young man who comes from a low-income family. He lives near downtown Denver with his mother, father, and two younger sisters. His parents do not speak English. Rene dreams of one day attending Princeton University and becoming a surgeon, pharmacist, or attorney, and he hopes his experience at Arrupe Jesuit will aid him in those endeavors.

After a brief explanation to students about the strange man with a briefcase, Kelly directs me to a desk in the middle of the classroom. A thirty-something-year-old man with swept hair, lightly flecked with signs of gray, stands in front of the class. His name is John Witkiewicz ("Mr. Wicks" to his students), and he is a theology teacher at Arrupe Jesuit. He has been with the school for 10 years.

Then we're off, and class begins. I soon realize that today's visit will not be like the school visits I've done in the past. The class starts with a discussion on mercy and how it might be shown to others. Students then work in small groups to decide how they could help someone who is being bullied, someone who is hungry, or a community in mourning. Mr. Wicks emphasizes how even single acts of kindness and compassion can change lives, invoking a story I haven't heard for many years. Adapted from an essay written by Loren Eiseley, the story tells of a little boy throwing stranded starfish into the ocean along a beach as the tide recedes. The boy is challenged by an old man, who says the effort is futile; the boy can't possibly save all the starfish. The boy responds by picking up another starfish, throwing it back into the sea, and saying, "It made a difference for that one."

Mr. Wicks also makes clear to students that there is a cost to helping others. He offers the suppression of the Society of Jesus in the second half of the 18th century as an example of the dangers involved in challenging social structures and the power that so often lies behind them. Real change, Mr. Wicks reminds the class, requires strength, fortitude, and commitment.

Then class is over, and students file out of the classroom, voices and laughs slowly receding as they take their seats for the next lesson.

I remain behind to speak with Mr. Wicks. Originally from New York, the composed, well-mannered man in front of me tells me that he sometimes got into trouble during his time in Jesuit high school. Every time, he says, the school's leaders picked him up, set him back on the right path, and gave him another chance. It was this patience, this persistent commitment to helping others that attracted him to teaching at Arrupe Jesuit.

Mr. Wicks tells me about his job and why he does it. He tells me about the challenges that come along with teaching Arrupe Jesuit's students, who come exclusively—and deliberately—from low-income families. Focused only on low-income children, Arrupe Jesuit's unofficial motto is that if you can afford to attend the school, you can't attend the school. Eighty-nine percent of the school's student population is Hispanic, and another 9 percent come from other minority groups. Only 2 percent of the school's population is white.

*John Witkiewicz,
Theology Teacher*



Research has consistently shown that low-income and minority students tend to underperform academically when compared to more affluent, Caucasian peers. Called the “achievement gap,” this phenomenon is often referenced by education scholars and policymakers. The trend is clearly evident at Arrupe Jesuit, where most students enter the school several grade levels behind academically.

Far too often, these gaps are implicitly or explicitly dismissed as unfixable. I have often heard that the only way to truly eliminate the achievement gap is to eradicate poverty, the subtle undertone being that there is little schools can do to help overwhelmingly challenging student populations. Certainly, no one is more familiar with the insidious effects of poverty than the staff at Arrupe Jesuit. Yet Mr. Wicks tells me that making excuses or giving up on students is not an option.

Despite the frustrations and challenges of working with a tough student population, Arrupe Jesuit teachers and leaders continue holding students to high expectations, challenging them, and giving them chance after chance to succeed.

And succeed they do.

Every student in Arrupe Jesuit’s 2015 graduating class was accepted by a college or university of his or her choice. Ninety-two percent of those students were the first in their family ever to attend college, and nearly half were the first to graduate high school. Combined, the class of 2015 has earned more than \$6.2 million (and counting) in merit-based scholarships. All of them now have an opportunity to break the cycle of poverty for themselves and their future families.

As Mr. Wicks speaks, it occurs to me that today’s lesson in mercy and compassion despite adversity was more than a simple class. It was an illustration of the work Arrupe Jesuit does each and every day.

A Culture of Persistence and Success

As I follow Rene from class to class, I realize that Mr. Wicks’ story—inspiring though it may be—is not unique at Arrupe Jesuit High School. The school’s mission and culture permeates everything it does, and I find it reflected in every staff member with whom I speak.

Shortly after leaving Mr. Wicks’ classroom, Rene and I find ourselves in a math classroom run by a man named Cory Gaines. Wielding a yardstick like a mathematical maestro, Mr. Gaines greets me by jokingly instructing students to say hello, then ignore me. They laugh and take their seats, and Mr. Gaines proceeds to walk them through logarithms while cracking more silly jokes to keep the mood light. Correctly believing that students are not inclined to volunteer answers about tricky mathematical questions, he uses a Wheel of Fortune-style tablet app to randomly select students for participation. It is perhaps the most fun I’ve ever seen anyone have doing logarithms, and I find



myself almost inclined to be excited about them myself. Almost.

Later in the day, I have the pleasure of meeting Rene's Spanish teacher, Molly Mulligan. An athletic redhead with a charmingly authentic sense of humor, she has a uniquely challenging job. Many of the students in her classroom are native Spanish speakers, while others are still learning the language. But Ms. Mulligan tells me she is no stranger to tough teaching situations. After leaving the profession for a number of years, she worked for a domestic violence shelter. There, she worked with and taught battered women. That experience reminded her that she was called to teach. More importantly, it solidified her desire to help others. Two years after returning to the teaching profession, she found herself at Arrupe Jesuit. It's the best school she's ever been in, she says, and she has no intention of "getting off the train" anytime soon.

Asked what makes Arrupe Jesuit so special, Ms. Mulligan states confidently that it is the staff—and the mission that binds them—that sets the school apart. Like Mr. Wicks, she acknowledges that working with Arrupe Jesuit's students can be difficult, and that it is sometimes frustrating to continue offering chances to students who appear uninterested in taking them. Still, she continues offering those chances while also holding every student to the school's high expectations.

When I ask Ms. Mulligan what motivates her to continue trying with even the most difficult kids, she pauses for a moment. "Behind every kid is an explanation, not an excuse," she says. "We are all some kids have." She has seen many students who appear to be

lost recover and succeed if they are simply given the opportunity to keep trying with the right support, and she loves seeing graduates return and speak about the impact Arrupe Jesuit had on them and their lives. For her, that is what matters most.

Arrupe Jesuit's guiding values are also on display among the school's leadership team. Yet when I ask Principal Michael O'Hagan, a tall, thin, proudly Irish man with a dry sense of humor, how Arrupe Jesuit's leaders have built the school's culture of perseverance and success, he tells me that they are not trying to build a culture at all. Instead, he says, the school is driven by a 500-year-old Jesuit culture that holds justice, giving, and compassion above all else. The staff's belief in these values is what truly holds the school together, along with a deep understanding of the kids Arrupe Jesuit serves and the importance of serving them. In Mr. O'Hagan's words, "You can't teach any kids if you don't know where they are coming from. Our kids don't have many safety nets, but even small successes give them hope for the future."



*Molly Mulligan,
Spanish Teacher*

Teachers who start at Arrupe Jesuit go through an orientation in which the reality of their job is made very clear. The school cannot afford to pay them as well as public schools, they will work very hard with challenging students, and although the school offers a tight-knit professional support network, they will often be frustrated. In return, they have a chance to impact and change at-risk young people's lives in a very real way. It is this opportunity that drives those who choose to work at Arrupe Jesuit, Mr. O'Hagan tells me, not the promise of high pay or easy work. Coupled with the school's Jesuit

*Michael O'Hagan,
Principal*



heritage, this foundational motivation undergirds the school's culture and unites its employees. Arrupe Jesuit staff members very rarely leave the school despite receiving offers to make more money in easier environments elsewhere.

Mr. O'Hagan understands better than most what is required to help students like those Arrupe Jesuit serves. Born in Brooklyn, New York, his grandparents often told him about living in New York at a time when the Irish were not kindly looked upon. His father was a World War II veteran who joined the fire department at the lowest rank, and who eventually became the first firefighter to hold every

rank in the New York City Fire Department. It was Mr. O'Hagan's father who instilled in him the worldview that lies at the heart of Arrupe Jesuit's work today: That every life has value, that all people deserve an opportunity to prove themselves, and that drive, commitment, and hard work matter far more than where a person comes from.

Mr. O'Hagan attended a rigorous Jesuit high school in Manhattan at which every student received an academic merit scholarship. Interestingly, this is the same high school that would play a crucial role in Mr. Wicks' life many years later. It took more than an hour for Mr. O'Hagan to get to school, and his days were filled with hard work, high expectations, and strong support from Jesuit school leaders. His parents sacrificed daily to make the arrangement work. It is this experience that Mr. O'Hagan credits with forming the foundation of his guiding vision today.

After finishing school, Mr. O'Hagan went on to attend University of Notre Dame. To his parents' surprise, he decided to forgo more lucrative pursuits and return to the world of Jesuit education, teaching first in some of New York's toughest neighborhoods for a tiny salary and then using his experience to grow a Jesuit school in an infamously dangerous Boston neighborhood.

Mr. O'Hagan's lighthearted demeanor grows more serious as he recalls his time in New York and Boston. He tells me a story about a very young boy who brought a knife to school. Mr. O'Hagan later learned that the boy's mother had turned to drugs and prostitution. The boy sought only to protect himself against the stream of strange men his mother brought home. In another instance, Mr. O'Hagan visited a large family living in a tiny apartment

above a Chinese restaurant in a bad neighborhood in New York. He noticed that holes in the apartment wall had been plugged with steel plates. The family explained that rats from the kitchen below would chew through the thin walls and get into the room where the children slept. The steel plates were there to keep out the rats.

To Mr. O'Hagan, these stories are case studies in the overwhelming power of poverty and its impact on families. They are reminders of the fact that, for many low-income kids, the stakes are infinitely higher than they are for their higher-income peers. Most importantly, stories like these—and the desire to change them—are the reason he has continued working in Jesuit schools, eventually being asked to help open and run Arrupe Jesuit. For the families and students willing to sacrifice and work hard, Mr. O'Hagan believes that the school provides an opportunity for real, lasting change.

This sentiment is shared by Arrupe Jesuit's president, Father Tim McMahon, who greatly enjoys daily disproving the myth that low-income or at-risk students cannot learn. He recognizes that the kids Arrupe Jesuit serves are those who are least likely to succeed, those who statistics and probability have all but consigned to

failure. Yet he flatly rejects the argument that demography foretells destiny. He tells me matter-of-factly, "There is nothing wrong with these kids. All they need is an opportunity to overcome obstacles. Give a kid a safe place to succeed, and he'll succeed."

Like Mr. O'Hagan, Father Tim's words are born of experience. After attending a Jesuit high school, undergoing 13 years of formation, earning master's degrees in chemistry, biology, and theology, and working with



*Father Tim McMahon, S.J.,
President*



students in both the United States and Latin America, Father Tim found himself rising through the ranks of the Jesuits. Tasked with opening Arrupe Jesuit in Denver to meet a growing need for better educational opportunities in the city, Father Tim was a part of the team that hired Mr. O'Hagan. Seven years later, he returned to the school as president. Now, he is charged with overseeing the entire school and maintaining connections with philanthropists and community members interested in supporting Arrupe Jesuit's work.

When I opine that overseeing an operation like Arrupe Jesuit's must be no easy task, Father Tim tells me that he does not feel the need to micromanage. He reminds me that the school's ability to adhere to an already established Jesuit culture allows it to attract the right teachers and leaders, and that the school's ability to hire and fire as needed allows it to ensure cultural stability and an unwavering focus on the mission. The school works hard to create a sense of ownership among its teachers, who are encouraged to be creative and to "practice teaching as an art in a respectful environment." In return, teachers hold a deep, personal respect for the

school, its mission, and the kids they serve. It is their work, not simply work they do.

A Unique Vision of Success

Arrupe Jesuit is a different kind of school in more ways than one. On one hand, it is a school that is unashamedly focused on college prep. Students take a mandatory four years of math, science, and English, as well as three years of foreign language. Teachers use formative assessments like the Measures of Academic Progress to track students' progress throughout the year and provide help in areas where it is needed. At the end of each year, students also take summative tests designed to help the school better gauge where they fall among their peers. Director of Curriculum and Instruction Brook O'Drobinak makes clear that high standards, accountability, and academic rigor are all integral parts of Arrupe Jesuit's educational model.

Yet unlike most schools I visit, academics alone do not define success at Arrupe Jesuit. As Father Tim tells me, the school is not interested in mass producing highly educated technocrats. Rather, it primarily wants to produce "men and women for others." Arrupe Jesuit staff members are fond of saying the school is focused on formation, not simple education. In the eyes of the school's teachers and leaders, if a student



Brook O'Drobinak, Director of Curriculum and Instruction

leaves Arrupe Jesuit to attend college and build a successful career but fails to live a life focused on giving back to others, the school has failed. To that end, the school subscribes wholeheartedly to the Jesuit Secondary Education Association's profile of a graduate at graduation, or the "Grad-at-Grad" profile. Blending both academic and formational goals, this profile states that any student graduating from Arrupe Jesuit will be open to growth, religious, intellectually competent, loving, committed to justice, and work experienced.

Arrupe Jesuit's graduate profile is a tall order, but one that the school appears to be on track to meet in the case of Rene. Sitting in the school's quiet cafeteria as a light rain drums steadily against the windows, he tells me with a broad smile that he is interested in becoming a pharmacist, surgeon, or lawyer. But while these aspirations are held by many students in many schools, Rene makes clear that he is interested in these fields not because he believes they pay well or provide some level of prestige, but because he feels called to help others.

Rene is not alone. I hear a similar story echoed by Micaela Escontrias, Arrupe Jesuit's director of admissions and herself a member of the school's very first graduating class in 2007. Micaela came to Arrupe Jesuit during a time of upheaval in her life, and she credits the school with showing her that she could achieve more, that she had a place in the world. After attending college on a scholarship, earning a master's degree, and spending several years working with abused or neglected children, she returned to Arrupe Jesuit to find other kids the school could help. Visibly emotional when discussing what the school means to her, Micaela tells me that she sometimes pauses to think about where she would be without Arrupe Jesuit. It is that thought—and her thankfulness for the opportunity that Arrupe Jesuit provided—that

brought her back to the school. It continues to drive her outreach work on a daily basis.

Making It Work

Operating a school focused solely on low-income kids comes with a unique set of challenges. Arrupe Jesuit keeps a full-time counseling staff in order to help students through difficult personal and emotional issues, it is subject to the same overhead costs as other high schools, and providing a high-quality education is itself expensive. Even with lower staff salaries and cost-saving measures, the school roughly estimates that the cost of an Arrupe Jesuit student's yearly education is around \$12,000. Yet the school lists its yearly tuition as \$3,000, and most students pay only about \$1,000 of that after receiving financial aid from the school. To date, Arrupe Jesuit has never turned a student away for lack of ability to pay.



The school's costs are offset by a unique feature of Arrupe Jesuit and other Cristo Rey schools: Students quite literally work for their education. Every student works five full days a month in an entry-level, professional environment. As Rene and his fellow students crowd into the cafeteria for lunch, I sit down with Tom Mallary, the director of the school's Corporate Work Study Program. He explains that this year, the school has partnered with more than 120 businesses in fields ranging from advertising and marketing to medical care. Among the school's partners are EnCana Oil and Gas, Oppenheimer Funds, the City of Arvada, Comcast, and St. Anthony Hospital. The school provides

transportation to and from these businesses (I often see the white Arrupe Jesuit bus as I drive to my office in downtown Denver), and schedules are rotated in such a way that work days do not interfere with academic instructional time.

Mr. Mallery explains that each of the employers pays a fee for the student's service, and that this money—totaling about \$2.1 million last

Arrupe Jesuit. Now, having already worked in an orthopedic clinic, a dentist's office, and a law firm, he is grateful for the real-world work experience the program has provided. In fact, he's already thinking about what he'd like to try next.

By the time Rene graduates, he will have a four-year resume and entry-level experience in



year—helps cover the cost of tuition for students whose families would otherwise lack the means to do so. It also helps the school cover other operating costs. Money generated by CWSP accounts for roughly 50 percent of the school's total budget and covers about 65 percent of each student's total tuition costs. Combined with philanthropic donations raised by the school's development team, this money allows Arrupe Jesuit to continue fulfilling its promise to serve only the neediest children in the city.

Yet CWSP is more than just an innovative way of enabling Arrupe Jesuit to function. It is also an integral part of the school experience for Arrupe Jesuit students, as it is fundamental to the "Grad-at-Grad" trait of being "work experienced." In fact, CWSP is a major draw for the school. Rene tells me that it was the Corporate Work Study Program that led him to apply to

a number of professional fields that interest him. He'll also have a number of professional performance evaluations, all of which have so far rated him "Outstanding." While not all of Rene's peers earn this top rating, 98 percent of student workers in CWSP are rated "Good" or better by their employers. In a world where students must find ways to differentiate themselves from the crowd, such work experience will be immensely valuable.

Providing More Opportunities

While Arrupe Jesuit has mounted a herculean effort to assist families without the means to pay tuition at the school, there is often room for more help. More than 90 percent of Arrupe Jesuit's students receive some form of financial aid. In Rene's case, the aid comes from ACE Scholarships, a Denver-based nonprofit that provides private school tuition support

to low-income kids. Rene's scholarship helps him—and the other 79 ACE scholarship recipients at Arrupe Jesuit—attend the school he loves. Rene is currently helping his little sister fill out an application for an ACE scholarship so she can attend the school next year.

As all families served by ACE and Arrupe Jesuit, Rene's family still pays a portion of his tuition costs. It is important to both ACE and the school that families contribute something, even if it is what some would consider an insignificant amount, as a statement of commitment and resolve in providing a high-quality private education for their children. Yet for every family fortunate enough to receive the aid they need to attend a private school, there are others who are not so blessed. ACE has provided more than \$25 million in scholarships to more than 15,000 students since 2000. Several other organizations—Seeds of Hope, Parents Challenge, and the Challenge Foundation—also do their best to keep pace with the demand for help. Still, many thousands of children have been turned away because there is simply not enough money to provide scholarships for all of them. Unlike students at Arrupe Jesuit, who daily enjoy a safe environment focused relentlessly on helping them achieve great things, many students who do not receive scholarships face bleak futures.

More must be done to help these students. Every child deserves an Arrupe Jesuit. For today, though, I find myself deeply moved by the difference *this* Arrupe Jesuit is making in the lives of its relative handful of kids.

As I leave Arrupe Jesuit High School after nearly two days of immersing myself in its culture, community, and people, I find myself reflecting on the significance of what I have experienced. I again pause by the school's sign, this time with a newfound appreciation of what it stands for. As I walk to my car, keys jingling softly against the happy laughs and shouts of children leaving school, many of them heading home to places and situations I can scarcely imagine, I realize that it has stopped raining. It's a cliché metaphor, perhaps, but it nonetheless strikes me as a good summation of the way I feel as I climb into the car and head back to the office with the strong wind of reaffirmation at my back.

Something special is happening at Arrupe Jesuit High School. I am profoundly grateful to have touched, and to have been touched by, just a small part of the culture and community underlying the school's success.





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Photos provided by Patrick Kane and Arrupe Jesuit High School.



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