

The ‘minor miracle’ of the Marian Pritchett School

MarianPritchett2 Unique collaboration keeps school viable for pregnant and parenting young women in Boise.

By George Prentice –

Yes, there is a separation of church and state, as any American government student at Marian Pritchett School might tell you, but it is a convergence of public and private entities—and a lot of faith from both—that has kept the doors open at the Boise, Idaho, facility for nearly a century. But if anyone thinks that a faith-based mission and a publicly funded school isn’t maintaining a delicate balance, they need look no further than the nativity scene that stood on the front lawn of the modest campus in Boise’s North End in late December.



“It’s interesting, isn’t it?” said Major Rhonda Lloyd, corps officer with her husband, Robert, for The Salvation Army in Boise. “Yes, we have the love of Christ in us, and I’m pretty sure that the girls feel that love. But we never push that faith. I think it was Mother Teresa who said, ‘Preach the gospel at all times and, if necessary, use words.’ Well, we use very few words at Marian Pritchett, but the girls know that we love them. It works out remarkably well.”

The North End campus has seen a lot of change since 1921 when The Salvation Army opened a small hospital and home for unwed mothers on 24th Street. The young women primarily learned about cooking, housekeeping and typing while living in then-dormitories on the campus. In 1963, the Idaho Legislature decided to turn what was then called the “Booth Home” into a fully accredited high school. It was renamed the Marian Pritchett School in 2002 to honor its longtime educator and principal.

Then in 2010, the Joint Finance-Appropriations Committee of the Idaho Legislature zeroed out specific funding for the school, leaving it to the Boise School District to either find more than \$500,000 to keep the lights on, or shutter the nearly century-old institution. More than a few people wondered if the school should remain open.

“I remember people looking at us and asking, ‘Isn’t that kind of antiquated, to have a school for unwed mothers?’” Lloyd said.

[Major Rhonda Lloyd, Boise corps officer, ensures the girls feel loved. The Salvation Army provides weekly life](#)

Major Rhonda Lloyd, Boise corps officer, ensures the girls feel loved. The Salvation Army provides weekly life skills classes, from custody and guardianship to prenatal and parenting.

Chief Administrator Deborah Hedden-Nicely recalls reporters from The Christian Science Monitor visiting the school several years ago, referring to a number of similar schools for pregnant girls on the East Coast that were closing their doors in increasing numbers.

“They asked, ‘What’s your secret?’ And I told them it’s this unique private-public collaboration, and that private partner is faith-based,” Hedden-Nicely said.

The Boise School District and The Salvation Army accomplished what many considered to be impossible. Hedden-Nicely said through a difficult combination of job cuts and service eliminations, a bare-bones budget was cut down to the marrow.

“It was a minor miracle,” she said.

Hedden-Nicely is more than a principal. Due to the cutbacks, she needed to take on a full slate of classes, teaching American government, economics, early American history and 20th-21st century American history. She joined 10 other teachers, counselors, tutors and assistants who juggle every element of the Boise School District’s high school curriculum—from business and technology to physical education.

“But it’s a kinder, gentler PE,” said Hedden-Nicely with a smile. “We walk the neighborhood on good days, and we do prenatal yoga and prenatal Pilates.”

The easiest way to look at the Marian Pritchett School is that the school district handles all of the education and The Salvation Army owns and maintains the building and provides support services for the unique student body.

“The students are technically released to us on Wednesday afternoons,” Lloyd said. “That’s when we have life skills courses, dealing with everything from custody and guardianship, to prenatal and parenting classes. Actually we call it ‘Adulthood 101.’ A lot of what the girls are dealing with are not the same things that a typical high school girl might deal with.”

Therein lies the secret for the school’s success of keeping unwed mothers in school, Lloyd said.

“It’s estimated that 70 percent of young women who become pregnant drop out of school,” she said.

Everything from stigmatizing to bullying are commonplace for a pregnant teen walking school halls among her peers. Worse yet is the physical endurance.

“We see morning sickness on any given day,” said Hedden-Nicely. “But we get on the phone and say, ‘That’s OK; we can deal with that. But you need to get to school today.’ They can lie down here, get some juice and crackers, but at least they’ll be attending some classes.”

And labor pains? That’s a reality, too, but school officials map out delivery dates and return dates and, quite often, have students take their finals ahead of time in case delivery comes near finals week.

A typical day at school

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“In a traditional school, it’s just not possible,” Hedden-Nicely said. “They’re dealing with too many students where they can’t make too many exceptions to the rule.”

A day care, managed by the Boise-based nonprofit Giraffe Laugh, operates one of its centers right on the campus of Marian Pritchett. It’s used exclusively for students during the school year and the service is open to the general public when the school is not in session.

A typical school day begins with students arriving in the pre-dawn hours, dropping off their children—newborns to 3-year-olds—at the day care and heading off to class. The new mothers pick up their children during the lunch break so that they can eat together—the school’s lunchroom has as many highchairs and boosters as adult chairs—and then the children are taken back to the day care as the students return to class. It’s not unusual to see a nursing mother and infant in the midst of an economics class.

Beginning this past semester, Marian Pritchett students have been taking a class called Childhood Professionals, where they learn about caring for other people’s children. At the end of the year, those students are certified childcare professionals, meaning that they can be hired at any other day care and, presumably, be eligible for free or reduced-cost childcare for their own infants.

“It’s the first year we’re doing that; it’s a very full class,” Hedden-Nicely said.

Graduates of Marian Pritchett take much more with them than a high school diploma and day care certification when they depart. To the person, nearly all of them have been accepted as undergraduates to Boise State University or the College of Western Idaho or have secured full-time employment. The high school boasts a 98 percent graduation rate.

“I took students from one of my government classes down to the Ada County Courthouse the other day to watch dispositions and sentencings and up walks one of my former students,” Hedden-Nicely said. “She has a criminal justice degree from Boise State and she works at the courthouse.”

That student is just one of the hundreds of young women who have walked the halls at Marian Pritchett. In fact, 2014 marked the 50th anniversary of the school’s unique relationship with the Boise School District. Many of its alumni returned to share their memories.

"I definitely wouldn't have my diploma today if it weren't for this school," said 2013 graduate Amie Erickson. "I had to get up every morning with a kid and make my way to school. But it was a big family. We all bonded."

"Before I came here, I was a dropout, a runaway and obviously I got pregnant. I was lost in the crowd; I wasn't successful and didn't have anyone holding me accountable," said 2006 graduate Caitlin Pierce. "But I had all these people telling me that my future mattered. I'm absolutely the mom I am today because of my time here."

Marian Pritchett graduates include scores of Idaho professionals, including small-business owners, attorneys and even the principal of [Boise's] Trail Wind Elementary School, Deborah Watts.

Veteran teacher Diana Scott, who taught math and science at the school for 33 years—and still returns to Marian Pritchett as a substitute teacher—remembers all of the girls but, above all, remembers Marian Pritchett.

"She was larger than life and saw the big picture," said Scott. "She absolutely loved the girls but I remember her saying, 'That girl is going to graduate whether she wants to or not.'"

[At graduation, students receive a diploma from a fully accredited high school. Here, a mother celebrates her a](#)

At graduation, students receive a diploma from a fully accredited high school. Here, a mother celebrates her achievement with her baby. (Courtesy of The Salvation Army Boise)

Pritchett, whose beaming portrait hangs in the hallway of the school, was the head teacher at what was then known as the Booth Home. Following her death in 2002, the district named the school after her.

"I heard so many alumni say over the years that if it wasn't for Marian a lot of them would have dropped out," Scott said.

But Pritchett's 20th century school has a very different look—quite literally—in the 21st century.

"I think we're approaching 50 percent of our students being English language learners. We have quite a few resettled refugees," Hedden-Nicely said. "This year, we have students from Nepal, Burma, Thailand, Somalia, Rwanda, Congo, Mexico... oh my, there are a lot of nationalities."

Which introduces a new dynamic.

"To tell you the truth, over the years we have had students from opposing tribes. They would be enemies," Hedden-Nicely said.

But the common bond found at Marian Pritchett is universal.

“They’re all pregnant or they’re new mothers. And we need to get along, regardless of our differences,” she added.

Hedden-Nicely said that includes many faiths, in spite of the fact that The Salvation Army has provided the school’s foundation.

“And that particular spirit of Christmas is here through much of the year,” she said. “Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims, Christians... we share our faiths, and above all it’s a gratitude and mindfulness of the love we have for one another, no matter what.”