

Jewish benefactors some of Catholic schools' biggest donors

Casey McCorry | Aug. 4, 2010 NCR Today

Richard J. Henken, a Boston real estate company executive, grew up in a conservative Jewish family on the south side of Newton. He attends services on the Jewish High Holy Days and considers his religion an important aspect of his identity. He is also one of the most generous benefactors Catholic schools in greater Boston have.

Henken gives \$25,000 to \$30,000 a year to Catholic schools and serves as an officer on the board of the Catholic Schools Foundation, which raises millions each year to help send children from low-income families to Catholic schools.

"When I started telling my friends I had joined the board, I got a couple of funny looks," he said. "But whoever it is that wants to step up and provide a nurturing environment for at-risk youth based on Judeo-Christian values, I'm with you all the way."

Henken is one of a number of Jewish benefactors in Greater Boston who not only give generously to Catholic schools, but also provide significant fund-raising muscle at a time when the region's parochial schools are under severe financial strain. Other benefactors include: Robert Beal, president of the commercial real estate firm Beal Companies, Howard Kessler, his wife, Michele, and his firm, The Kessler Group, New England Patriots owner Robert Kraft. Along with Henken they have offered their support for Catholic schools for years saying they are passionate about Catholic schools because they provide an excellent education to the neediest children.

"We like to get a good return on our investment," Kraft said of his family's approach to philanthropy. "The backbone of this country has been made by first-generation [immigrants] coming here, educating their children, and living the American dream."

Cardinal Sean P. O'Malley is grateful, but not surprised. When the Virgin Islands was struck by a hurricane while he was bishop there, the public schools were closed for two years, he said, but with major contributions from Leon Hess, the Jewish founder of the Hess Corporation, which had a large refinery in the Islands, O'Malley was able to reopen the Catholic schools within a month.

"My experience of Jewish people is that they have a very profound social consciousness and sense of responsibility to the community, and in that sense are very generous to many nonprofit enterprises," he said.

A decrease of priests and nuns has forced schools to rely on lay teachers and administrators, demanding higher salaries. The Catholic Church remains strapped for cash, and many poor families can barely afford tuition, which generally costs about \$3,400 for elementary school and \$9,400 for high school, according to the Catholic Schools Foundation's website.

Jewish donors said they see their support for Catholic schools as an expression of Jewish values — promoting education, providing opportunity for the disadvantaged and new immigrants, and building institutions that benefit the community.

It's really attractive because it touches a couple of different things Jews tend to care about ? number one, it touches the poorest of the poor . . . and it does it through education,?? said Barry Shrage, president of Combined Jewish Philanthropies.

Henken was first inspired to donate money when he visited the nearby St. Peter School, and he was deeply moved ? beautiful children in uniforms, in relatively small classes, with big smiles, who were friendly and who were poised.??

The whole notion of asking ?What would Jesus do?? ? it seems to me whether you take him as Lord and savior or not, if you follow his guidelines, you would do OK,?? he said.

The full article discusses the relationship between Jews and Catholics in Boston since the 1930's.

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