

Something special happens at St. Anthony's

By Mary Ann Pires

Remember that children's story, "The Little Engine That Could"? It's been used for generations to teach youngsters optimism. "I think I can, I think I can" repeats the little engine as it tackles the near-impossible feat of pulling the long train over the mountain — and succeeds. Many see the book as a metaphor for the American Dream.

St. Anthony of Padua Catholic Church and School is like that little engine. The place simply has no sense of its place. So it achieves remarkable things like a high school graduation rate for its Pre-K through Sixth Graders, many of whom come from the community's most dire circumstances, that is 90 percent higher than the average. It also motivates some 50 percent of its graduates to go on to college. And does it all on a shoestring budget from a crumbling, 60-year-old building in West Greenville.

You don't have to be

GUEST COLUMN



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Catholic — and 90 percent of St. Anthony's school-children are not — in a state struggling with educational attainment and workforce development to

appreciate the value of a St. Anthony's School. There's something special going on there. Maybe it's the charismatic, indefatigable Pastor Fr. Patrick Tuttle, OFM, or maybe it's the brilliant, understated Principal Sister Catherine Noecker, OSF, and her team of dedicated faculty and staff.

Or maybe it's the parishioners who come from all over the area to volunteer and/or dig deep to make a \$6,000 education possible for the 101 students who pay tuition of only \$2,400 — if their families can. If they can't, the kids can attend St. Anthony's anyway, but their parents must be involved in their education.

Whatever the alchemy, it's been working for six decades, ever since a little Douthit Street farmhouse was purchased by some local visionaries to provide a quality education for children in the West Greenville community who had frequently been left behind. Five years

later, the present brick-and-cinder-block school on Gower Street was erected. The fact that it's still standing is a tribute to Divine Providence and to the people of the parish and neighborhood who helped build it and have tended it since 1956. But sometimes even God's grace isn't enough.

The structure has had it. Crumbling, with jerry-rigged features, electrical patches-upon-patches and leaks in the roof, St. Anthony's School building needs to be replaced.

Which is why the little neighborhood school with the big track record is turning to the larger community it has served so well for 60 years and asking for help, both with a new school and ongoing needs. And the community is responding. Like the vibrant African-American tapestry in its logo, St. Anthony's is weaving together that diverse cross-section of resources for which Greenville can lay such special claim. The money and the pledg-

es are coming in, as dedicated volunteers fan out in search of the \$5 million necessary to break ground and provide for contingencies.

It will be a dream place — a place where each grade will have its own classroom. No more doubling-up. It will have four, not the present two, bathrooms. And the faculty restroom won't have to also serve as the First Aid room and storage area. Most of all, it will be a safe, suitable setting in which to teach children, where evangelization is not the priority.

Thousands of Greenvilleans are buying into the St. Anthony's dream. My own Diversity Leaders Initiative at Furman's Riley Institute has adopted the school as one of its community projects. Business and civic leaders of all stripe are helping the campaign, last reported at the \$3.4 million mark, reach its goal. Some of Greenville's most generous foundations are making commitments, and the

local media are taking note.

Parishioners are scurrying to undertake their own mini-initiatives. Yes, something very special is going on — again — in Greenville.

Fr. Tuttle, who leads the congregation every Sunday in a prayer for the campaign's success, is wont to say that if God was walking the earth right now, Father believes He would walk right by him or any one of us in favor of one of these children. Dealt the harshest of life's hands, many now have a chance to play a positive role in South Carolina's future development, to become leaders, contributors.

St. Anthony's just needs an adequate greenhouse in which to continue its exceptional educational soil cultivation. If you'd like to learn more, please go to www.StAnthony-GreenvilleSC.org.

But be aware: "Small but mighty" St. Anthony's is seductive. It has a way of getting under your skin.