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“Precious” Moments: The Chicago Teens Story Oprah Won’t Want to Miss
Now playing on Chicago’s West Side: Blockbuster real-life drama of student social entrepreneurs changing their course in the city’s most gang-infested, depressed pocket

Chicago, IL– November 2, 2000 As “Precious,” based on the novel “Push” by Sapphire opens Friday in Chicago, and Oprah and Tyler Perry champion the film, there’s a real-life blockbuster playing out daily just 7.3 miles from the entertainment power broker’s Harpo Studios.

There, on Chicago’s West Side, where violence, gangs and poverty slam crushing blows daily, a group of almost 200 teens with grit and guts are starring in a real-life portrayal of poverty and the triumph of the human spirit. Like the fictional Harlem teen Clariceese “Precious” Jones, these teens are determined to rewrite their history and reach toward what life has in store for them, then reach back to inspire and transform their community.

Meet the new face of social entrepreneurs: The almost 200 freshmen and sophomore members of Christ the King Jesuit College Preparatory School, which opened its doors in August 2008 to provide a virtually free education for talented, but economically struggling students. In a world where we are always looking for good news, especially in this economy, especially in Chicago where gang violence has killed 5 teens in the last month, and especially at a time when a Hollywood film about teens triumphing over oppression, here’s a real-life story of Chicago teens proving that anything is possible. Their mantra: If you’ve got a dream, go get it!

Echoing the experiences of African-American teens struggling against poverty and violence everywhere, these Chicago high school students are playing this out right in front of Chicago, the world, and, in Oprah’s backyard. Michael Washington, 16, saw his uncle shot dead across the street from the house they shared. His mother died of a drug overdose when he was eight. He is raised by his grandmother. His father is not in the picture. Kyara Lee, 15, remembers crying as she heard: Her cousin was shot dead two blocks from her house. “He lost too much blood,” Kyara says. “I just pray to God to protect me.” Another 14-year-old freshman is being raised by his 21-year-old sister. All of the students work at a Chicago-area law firms, hospitals or corporate offices one day a week to earn 75 percent of their tuition. Michael works at a local hospital, escorting patients to their medical tests and room destinations.

Part of the student’s deal is that they will graduate from college and come back to help transform the Austin community. They’re already busy at work.

The students dodge gangs en route to school every day. They defy danger to knock on doors to sign up voters, to give their neighbors a voice. They set their alarms at 5 a.m. to

serve breakfast at a homeless shelter every other Saturday and distribute groceries from the school pantry. They have great expectations: to graduate from high school, and a university, and to make a difference in the world.

The 5'2 Michael describes his future: "I was going to be a basketball player. But now I have a Plan B. I am going to work in a hospital and help people." Recently, he shared the story of his on-the-job experience: A smile lit his face and he said, "One of the patients said to me, 'Thank God for Michael.'"

"As hard as it is to read or watch Precious' story on screen, it should remind us that human dignity is a precious commodity," said Rev. Christopher Devron, SJ, President of Christ the King. "We're blessed each day to give Michael and his classmates an opportunity to recognize their dignity and achieve greatness. Anything less would be a waste."

Oprah says in interviews that she was "utterly blown away" by the "Precious" movie, that it "struck me in a way that nothing else has." She says she has to bring it to her fan base. She has to let them know about this film.

She and Perry are doing what they can to push "Precious.".One way might be to surface the story of teens who are living the "Precious" story every day of their lives. And, bringing hope from their tiny corner of the world on Chicago's West Side. That's a powerful story.

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About Christ the King Jesuit College Preparatory School

Christ the King Jesuit College Preparatory School in Chicago is a Catholic Jesuit secondary school (grades 9-12) using the Cristo Rey model to serve young men and women from the Austin neighborhood and surrounding communities of Chicago's West Side. Christ the King opened in August 2008 with 120 freshman. This year, a second freshman class was added to the high school, bringing the current number of students now enrolled in the freshman and sophomore classes to about 200 students. Each year, a new freshman class will be added. Students will move in January, 2010, to a new three-story building now under construction at 5088 W. Jackson Blvd. Designed by award-winning Chicago architect John Ronan, the building is large enough to educate 600 students total and it will be the first Catholic high school built on the West Side of Chicago in 85 years, and is a much-anticipated sight for residents of this blighted neighborhood.

Small, safe and faith-based, Christ the King expands on a tradition of successful education with a new urban idea: Christ the King is now bringing Jesuit education to the west side of Chicago. Through the Cristo Rey model, Christ the King makes possible the dream of a quality and affordable education for students whose families could not otherwise pay the tuition charged by private schools. Students earn three-quarters of their tuition costs while gaining valuable, life-changing skills and experience through jobs at Chicago area companies. The Cristo Rey Model is based on an innovative partnership between urban education and the business community that started in Chicago ten years ago. Since then, the movement has grown to over a dozen schools nationwide. 97.8% of all graduates attend a college or university. Christ the King was the 20th Cristo Rey model school to open in the U.S. (for more information, visit

