

Meet 'Community Man' Hero quizzes students on history

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CR Staff/Owen Sweeney III
Brother Jesse O'Neill, S.M., as "Community Man" quizzes students at Mother Seton Academy, Fells Point, on the religious orders teaching at the school.

The wind was howling outside the three large, arched windows in the cafeteria of Mother Seton Academy, Baltimore, but inside the student body sat quietly and obediently in their blue and white uniforms, lined up on green cafeteria table benches.

Could the youngsters maybe sense the looming presence of a super hero? Look ... up in the sky ... no ... through the door ... it's Community Man! "Community Man" is 6-foot-8-inch staff member Brother Jesse O'Neill, S.M. The speech teacher, who is also coordinator of the school's prayer services, developed the idea for the character as a way to celebrate "Foundation Days," which recognize the school's six sponsoring religious organizations: Daughters of Charity, School Sisters of Notre Dame, Sisters of St. Francis of Philadelphia, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, Marianists and Xaverian Brothers.

Dressed in a long white robe with a large Community Man sign around his neck (made by student Shakia Epps), the character makes appearances at the end of prayer services and quizzes the students on religious order trivia.

"Who works here as a Xaverian?" Brother O'Neill asked excitedly. "Who is the foundress of the Sisters of St. Francis of Philadelphia? What date do we celebrate Elizabeth Ann Seton?"

The volume increased twofold in the once quiet room as many arms shot up into the air, hands waving, as students

were eager to provide the correct answers.

Brother Stephen Strausbaugh, C.F.X., scurried around the room carrying a wicker basket of coupons, trying to keep up with the pace of the question/answer session. He was the featured speaker for the Dec. 3 prayer service honoring the founding day of the Xaverian Brothers.

It was the fourth interactive prayer service conducted on four different Founder's Days for which students have been learning the history of the religious orders. An army green "Founder's Wall" in the hallway features black-framed photos of the six religious organizations that founded Mother Seton Academy in 1993. "He's a sort of super hero," said Marsha Koger, director of development, about Community Man. "He has been a real hit with the kids. They are so excited to get coupons and to have a chance to interact with him."

Those who answer the trivia correctly are awarded yellow coupons which later can be traded for scarves, candles, fragrances and other gifts for their parents in the school's "Community Store," set up before Christmas break.

Sixth-grader Jalonnice Kendall has saved 15 coupons because he keeps "getting the answers right." Camerya McNeill said she is "getting better at it." The seventh-grader has five coupons.

"We wanted the kids to understand the community here and who supports the school," said the school's president, Sister Charmaine Krohe, S.S.N.D., "to learn about the founders and foundresses – to inspire them to continue to learn. It's a fun way to get them excited and involved. It's amazing."

Community Man sometimes randomly walks into classrooms around the school, asking students questions.

"If I call myself a man," Brother O'Neill told the students, "I live my life closed." The Marianist crossed his arms over his chest in a non-approachable gesture. "But if I call myself 'Community Man,' I live my life open," and he opened his arms in a welcoming gesture.