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LIFE LESSONS

CRISTO REY ST. MARTIN COLLEGE PREP USES A UNIQUE WORK/STUDY MODEL THAT PREPARES STUDENTS BOTH FOR COLLEGE AND FOR LIFE.

BY MITCH HURST
THE NORTH SHORE WEEKEND

Anajancy, member of the class of 2021 at Cristo Rey St. Martin High School (Cristo Rey) in Waukegan, has big dreams. She's accomplished plenty already, including being among the first in her family to go to high school. But she's poised to do more.

It is Cristo Rey's unique approach to a college prep education, combining work experience with study, that is preparing Anajancy for a bright future. For nearly four years, Anajancy has worked for the Lake County Public Works Department, analyzing data and tracking tests to make sure water is clean. "Every week we go to work one day of the week, and it seems like we're missing school, but the teachers are very supportive," says Anajancy, whose last name was withheld per school policy. "We go to corporate jobs and learn about the real world, how to interact with people and have communications skills."

While Anajancy says at times the work/life balance can be difficult, especially for a high schooler, the tradeoff is worth it—especially when she is learning skills that will benefit her both in college and in real life.

The first Cristo Rey school in the U.S.—Cristo Rey Jesuit High School in Pilsen—was founded 25 years ago to provide a quality college preparatory education for children of low-income families in communities that lacked educational opportunities. The schools, based on the work/study model, now dot the country, from Washington state to Los Angeles to Massachusetts.



Cristo Rey St. Martin High School held a delayed graduation ceremony for 2020 graduates on July 24, 2020.

Cristo Rey was founded in Waukegan in 2004 on the same principle: To provide low-income children in the greater Waukegan and North Chicago communities with an affordable college prep experience. Through quality work opportunities, students are able to offset about 60 percent of the costs of a private education and learn valuable

lessons in the workplace.

"Our students work as part of the high school experience, and the purpose is twofold: The impact is, number one, financially, and it allows our students to earn the majority of the costs of their education,"

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says Preston Kendall, president of the school. "The other side of it is just the experience that our students get. When you're coming out of a community of poverty it's very isolating. The work/study program gives them incredible access to different companies and businesses and they're meeting people they wouldn't otherwise meet."

It's hard to argue with the success of the Cristo Rey model, especially in Waukegan. Over the years, the school has built an impressive track record of both college placement and more importantly, college graduations.

Cristo Rey accounts for just seven percent of the total student population of the Waukegan area, but 50 percent of the bachelor's degrees earned by area high school students. As importantly, per capita household income of Cristo Rey families is less than a third of other families.

Retention is key. According to the school's records, 92 percent of the students who enrolled as freshman in 2018 are due to graduate in the 2021 class. For the first time in the school's history in 2020, 100 percent of the graduating class was accepted to a four-year college. Universities to which students have been accepted include Johns Hopkins, Georgetown, Brown, Loyola, and Benedictine. Seventy percent of Cristo Rey's graduating class of 2015 completed their bachelor's degrees.

"Statistically, a college degree far outpaces a high school diploma or associates degree as far as lifetime earnings," says Kendall.

Like many private schools, Cristo Rey has been heavily impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. The

school faces big challenges in trying to provide education to low-income students during this time.

Just because of the crowded living situations many of our students are in they don't necessarily have their own room or a quiet place to go where they can study," Kendall says. "We're lucky enough that a few years ago we went to what we call one-to-one learning and each student was issued a Chromebook so all of our

teachers use to measure how much our students are progressing in their learning," Kendall says. "For our freshman and sophomores, it was the highest-level achievement in math and English that we've seen in the school's history, and half the year was remote learning."

Kendall says that while students are struggling due to the pandemic, more than 70 percent of the parents

"The big impact for us is really the work program. The financial impact and the integral experience of the work program that the students all share is part of our culture," Kendall says. "Losing that cultural piece is probably the biggest hit."

While the pandemic has posed both funding and operational challenges for Cristo Rey administrators and teachers, it can't dampen the students' hope for



Students at Cristo Rey St. Martin High School recently got to celebrate their accomplishments with a delayed ceremony.



students have their own device." School performance during the pandemic has not dropped off. Indeed, there are indicators that students are handling the challenges just fine.

"In the spring we had our highest measures of academic progress. It's a standardized test

Anajancy will graduate from Cristo Rey in 2021 and hopes to study business in college.

of Cristo Rey students lost their jobs during the pandemic, adding an additional layer of stress for the students.

"We know that a lot of our juniors and seniors went out to Walgreens and Home Depot and other places just to get a paycheck to support their families," says Kendall.

The biggest challenge posed by the pandemic is the loss of work opportunities students usually have in the school year to both learn and help subsidize their education at Cristo Rey.

the future.

"I obviously want to go to college. I feel like there are so many careers if I study business," Anajancy says. "Hopefully, I'll just get a job and maybe one day start a business. But in the end my goal has always been to come back to help the community and help my parents."

For more information about Cristo Rey St. Martin High School and how you can support its mission, visit cristoreymartin.org.