

Tim Russert was the keynote speaker at the first “Celebrate Catholic Education dinner,” held Feb. 1, 2001, at the Adam’s Mark Hotel in downtown Buffalo. The dinner is held annually in support of Catholic education in the Diocese of Buffalo. Below is the text of his address.

My dad taught me the true lessons of life with the quiet eloquence of his hard work.

He got up early every day and was always on time. He gave an honest day’s work and he never, never complained.

He was a truck driver and a sanitation man. He never could finish high school, much less go to college. He quit in the 10th grade to go fight in World War II.

He came home and he worked two full-time jobs for 37 years so his four kids could go to Catholic school.

And those schools changed my life. The Sisters of Mercy and the Jesuit Fathers taught little Timmy Russert how to read and write, but more importantly they taught him right from wrong.

I would not be here this evening, but for my Catholic school education. Others are not as fortunate. Twelve kids a day are shot dead in the streets of America – 12 a day!

Nearly 35 percent of our children are now born into homes with only a single parent. Many times they are really just kids having kids. For many, all that awaits them is a life of drugs, and gangs, and violence, and often death. Our country should declare that the central mission of our society is to convince our young people they must finish school, learn a skill, get a job, get married, then have a baby, in that order.



Washington has produced a balanced budget. They will, in the next few years, need to restructure Medicare and Social Security to accommodate the impending retirement of the huge baby boomer generation and they will no doubt reform the tax code again and they will build more prisons and put more police on the street – all understandable.

But unless we dramatically reduce the number of kids having kids, we will not recognize our society. There soon will be 70 million children under the age of 18 living in the United States, with 25 million born to homes with just one parent.

There are wonderful success stories that have emerged from this kind of situation, but it is so, so difficult if you are 18, unmarried, without a high school education or job, and you have a baby. The chances are 80 percent that that baby will grow up in poverty.

And more often than not these children are devoid of any of the social skills or cultural values so vital to success – even survival – devoid of basic respect for people, and property, and even human life. We cannot watch a lost generation slip away.

We cannot afford to write off those 25 million kids. They are either our future work force or our future crime statistics. It's that simple.

If we are truly serious about competing aggressively in an even more challenging global economy, we need to give these kids guidance and opportunity. To do so is both doing good and enlightened self-interest.

They are the most important economic, national security, and moral issues facing our country.

These kids need direction. They desperately need the same chance the Jesuits and Mercy Sisters here in Buffalo gave me – a chance to study hard and to make it to go through life with confidence, and dignity, and values.

That's the magic of Catholic school education – whether the students are Catholic or non-Catholic.

Make no mistake about it. Supporters of the Diocese of Buffalo – you will change many lives and, I dare say, even save a few with your support tonight.

The “secret of the success” of your schools is actually fairly obvious. You believe in your God, in your family, in yourself, in your values, and in your schools.

Remember the message our parents, and grandparents, and teachers repeated and repeated – and instilled in us, a belief that if you worked hard and played fair, things really would turn out all right. And you know something - after working for senators and governors, meeting popes and interviewing presidents – I think they might be right.

Will Rogers put it this way, “It sure seems funny – the older I get, the smarter my mother and father seem to get.”

Our students must reject the conventional wisdom that success is only for the rich, or privileged, or ivy-league educated. Don’t believe it. I didn’t. Because people with real values have a way of helping, and teaching, and reaching one another.

People with backgrounds like yours and mine can and will make a difference.

In Poland, it was a young electrician named Lech Walesa, the son of a carpenter, who transformed a nation from communism to democracy.

In South Africa, Nelson Mandela – President Nelson Mandela - a brave black man who worked his way through law school as a police officer, spent 28 years in jail to make one central point – we are all created equal.

All these leaders have one thing in common with you. Like the past, the future leaders of this country and this world will be born not to the blood of kings, but to the blood of immigrants and pioneers.

Because of you, thousands of children in Buffalo will now have the opportunity to be doctors, nurses, therapists, lawyers, accountants, social workers, journalists, businesspeople, or teachers, and more. And in those vital professions, their contributions can be enormous.

They can help save lives, provide prosperity, record history, prevent disease, and train young minds. Yes, they will succeed. And they will make a difference if they only accept the simple fact that their family, and values, and Catholic education have prepared them for this challenge as well as anyone in this country.

Remember the words of the American Olympics coach who looked up to his young athletes and said, "I know the experts say you're underdogs - but you were born to be players. You were meant to be here. At this time. At this moment. Seize it. Do it. Be the best!"

And did they ever. They won the gold medal against all odds.

And so, too, with the Catholic school students here and all across this country. They were born to be players in this extraordinary blessing called life. So inspire them, motivate them, cajole them, discipline them, and educate them. It is not always easy – but it is essential. It is so very hard to have our children understand – they are never, never, entitled, but they are always, always loved. And the respect that flows from that love is truly the most important gift we can give them.

That is our charge. That is our opportunity. That's what it means to be a supporter of the Buffalo Catholic schools in the year 2001.

One last thought. In 1963, Sister Mary Lucille Socciarelli, RSM, started a school newspaper at St. Bonaventure School. She made me the first editor. Her attention and her inspiration made a true difference in my life. She encouraged me to apply to Canisius High School where, from 1964 to 1968, Father John Sturm scolded me and molded me, repeating practically everyday, "Sorry, Russert, mercy is for God; I deliver justice."

His discipline made a difference in my life. He underscored the words of St. Ignatius Loyola – "Pray as if everything depended on God - work as if everything depended on you."

There are 2,489 Catholic school teachers in 110 schools of this diocese.

Their starting salary is \$16,500 – that’s \$320 a week for one of the toughest and most important jobs in our society. And yet at great financial sacrifice. The vast majority of these teachers have been teaching for more than 10 years. They have stayed the course. They have kept the faith.



And to that end I would like to announce tonight the creation of the “Sister Mary Lucille - Father John Sturm Making a Difference Award.” *(Sister Lucille and Father Sturm are pictured with Tim).* Each year I will provide \$1,500 to a Catholic school teacher selected by the

Diocese of Buffalo whose extraordinary dedication is truly making a difference in the lives of his or her students.

This annual award will serve as a constant and tangible reminder of the deep social concern and the high standards and values exemplified by Sister Mary Lucille Socciarelli of the Sisters of Mercy, and Father John Sturm of the Society of Jesus.

We need to keep and reward our good teachers - because, I have no doubt, in their classrooms there is a little boy or little girl in the last row who probably talks too much, is a bit of a mischief-maker, whose smile is part cherubic – part devilish, but behind those sparkling eyes is someone who is scathing and yearning – someone who really loves and needs you to show him the way, for he or she is the next little Timmy Russert, and because of teachers who make a difference, he or she may very well be the next host of “Meet the Press.”

And for that alone I am so honored to be here tonight as a graduate of the schools of the Diocese of Buffalo.

Long live the Sister Mary Lucille - Father John Sturm Award. Long live our bishop. Long live our Catholic schools, and long live the warm and generous spirit in this room.

Thanks for caring; thanks for sharing. Thanks for inviting me home.