

## Christmas 2001 Fundraising Speech for the Seton Foundation for Learning

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Every year the Seton Foundation for Learning, a group of three catholic schools that educates mentally retarded children, visits you for our annual and crucial fundraising appeal. We feel like old friends – as family. There are many, like myself, who are parishioners. You have been so good to us. We are truly grateful.

It is now one year since our last appeal and things are completely different. Due to the recent tragedy, none of us will ever be the same again. The Seton families send our best and sincerest wishes to you and your families. We come this year with heavy hearts. Our beloved founder Bishop Patrick V. Ahern says it best: “It is hard when we are all heartbroken. To be asking in this time of grief to be taking chances on a raffle seems so insensitive. But we must go on, now more than ever.”

Today, I can tell you a story of joy, miracles, and happiness. This is why we have come.

Seton started fifteen years ago with six children, one class, and no money. Its mission was to educate mentally handicapped children, aged five to thirteen, just like a normal catholic grammar school would. One simple, but profound, comment from a parent started our journey: “Bishop, you educate our normal children, why can’t you educate our mentally handicapped? After all, we listened to you on the church’s teaching about life, knowing full well before birth what was to be.”

Today, because of God’s love and your dollars year after year, we now have 98 children and three campuses and are now educating young boys and girls from ages three to twenty-one. We have a pre-school, The Joan Ann Kennedy school, at St Mary of the Assumption in Port Richmond. Mother Franciska grammar school has just opened on the grounds of St Joseph Hill, and the Patrick V Ahern High School is located at Moore High School. It takes ten times the amount of money to educate a special child. The love is free.

My son, Robert, is now twenty-five. He was Seton's first graduate. He did not get to attend until he was ten years old. The school was not born until then. Sadly, he had leave four short years later. What might have been?

Robert, like most children, thinks concretely. Everything is "black and white." They only know how to tell what is on their minds. Their place in heaven is already reserved, as they do not know how to sin. In our house, Wheel of Fortune can never be pre-empted. When Pope John Paul visited NYC in 1995, part of his itinerary was to say Mass at Giants Stadium. Wheel of Fortune, of course was preempted. Immediately, Robert asks his mother: "Does he know Vanna is on?" And oh yes, YOU WILL be told how bad you really look on those bad hair days. Or, as he did the other week while eating dinner: "I've had better!" Only he could get away with it. These comments bring joy and laughter to our household. They are OUR successes. They are appropriate and set benchmarks for future progress. He is our son, Robert, and we love just the way he is.

His simplicity and innocence were never more evident on the morning of the tragedy. Robert is really a six year old in a twenty-five year old body. Like most families, Mother needed her children home. I picked up my daughter Kathryn here in the eighth grade at St Clare and my nineteen-year-old son, Andrew, now a lector here, went and picked up Robert. My wife and I were thinking what Robert might say. On tough days we often will ask ourselves why we cannot be just like him. He does not know how to worry. He lives in a world all his own - a happy world. So he did not let us down when he uttered: "Mom, what's for lunch?" upon exiting the car. Oh, the joy in a very sad time! It brought us our only smile during those first few days.

What could have been? This is why I do this year after year – so that no other child has to be denied a first-class special education program like the one Seton offers. You support us year after year. Dollars at a time has built this school. All of the money goes to the children.

Over ten years ago, a St. John's student named Brian Cannizzaro helped us with some fundraising. He became Robert's buddy. One day Brian took the shirt off his back and gave it to my son to keep. Somehow we lost touch with each other. But, actions sometimes speak louder than words. Robert wore that shirt every night for the next eight years until it was frayed and worn beyond repair. Brian was Robert's hero. Brian then became a firefighter. He was lost on September 11. His funeral mass was here at St Clare's on November 15. A priest friend of

mine remarked that our firefighters were all heroes before that fateful day. We just found out who they were. Robert knew one. The following day, September 12, one of Seton's high school students was called to heaven. He died of natural causes. It helps me cope with the enormity of the tragedy when I daydream and wonder if Brian has indeed found him too and he is now wearing a special something Brian felt he needed.

That night, there was not a complaint about Wheel of Fortune. So you really do wonder?

When my wife sees the Bishop, she hugs him, kisses him, and whisper in his ear: "Thank you, I love you. You gave us those four wonderful years." The miracles are happening everyday now. I always tell people that God has an office at Seton. Today, I ask you to reach out and help us – like you always have. Let me in advance say thank you, I love you. We so desperately need your support.

Although acts of evil now demand our attention and are having such disturbing effects on us, acts of goodness come into our lives more quietly, sometimes so invisibly that we hardly notice their power or appreciate their effect on us. We notice! You can never do better with a ten-dollar bill than to buy a chance for a ten thousand dollar savings bond and let us continue the joy, love, and miracles we have been producing these fifteen, love-filled years. If you feel generous, you can purchase three chances for \$25.00. We know it is tough out there, so maybe you can just offer some change or even a smile. No matter what, we love you so. God bless all you always and thank you Msgr. / Father for this time.

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