

## A mission not to deny any child

John Breunig, editorial page editor of The Advocate and Greenwich Time

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STAMFORD -- A few weeks ago, I got an email from Garland Walton of Domus inviting me to meet with Executive Director Mike Duggan.

"You're an interesting person, and so is my boss -- I think you'll have a good conversation," she wrote.

Well, one of us was sure to be disappointed.

I showed up a few days later at the Lockwood Avenue building in Stamford where the Domus middle school and youth employment program are based. Garland was out sick that morning, so Mike and I settled in an empty classroom, silently considering one another for a moment as we mulled the reason for our meeting.

Duggan, it turns out, may be a better interviewer than I am. It probably comes from years of seeking common ground with young people who don't always invite conversation. After a bit of banter, he closes the gap between his childhood in Quincy, Mass., and my own roots in New Rochelle, N.Y. Our origins are betrayed by lingering verbal tics. He clings to the native "Quin-zee" and I can't shake erasing the "w" and making a single word of "Nerrochelle."

In a few chess-like moves, he deduces that his wife's aunt was one of my teachers at my Catholic grade school. By serendipity, while searching in the basement for a novel a few days later, I pull out a Bible teachers gave each student upon graduation. Inside the cover is an inscription from the aunt, "Sister Mary Alice."

Duggan graduated in 1982 from College of Holy Cross, where he studied sociology and religion. During summers, he worked as a bouncer at Rascals bar in Cape Cod. Incredibly, Mike Duggan's job was once to kick out people who presented a challenge.

These days, he reaches out with both hands to embrace young people facing challenges. Throughout our casual chat in the classroom, those hands never stop moving. They clap, they offer thumbs ups, they sweep the air to suggest elevating kids, they clamp to demonstrate bonding. They move so much it seems impossible that the lights shut off every few minutes because the motion detectors aren't picking up our presence.

After graduation, he served in the Jesuit Volunteer Corps for a couple of years, living on "two bucks a day" while handling crisis intervention with kids in Park Slope. Following his first year, a nun told him he was good at the work, and suggested he stick with it for another year. He then spent eight years with Good Shepherd Services in Brooklyn, N.Y., which focuses on preventing vulnerable youth from becoming disenfranchised.

In 1991, while living in Crown Heights, he interviewed for the job at Domus. With kids of his own, the timing was right for a step up the management ladder. The interview at the Greenwich Hyatt, though, cloaked the shaky reality of his new situation. Domus, which at the time was simply a residential home for troubled boys, was reeling from a financial

scandal. Such was his introduction to lower Fairfield County, where extreme wealth and poverty are always cautious neighbors.

Staff from the Connecticut Department of Children and Families stopped by on his first day on the job. He got the grim message even quicker than that.

"One minute on the job and I was told there was no money," he recalls. "It was week to week. My wife (Karen) told me 'We lived on two dollars a day; I guess we can go another year.' "

He stuck with the job anyway, putting his mouth where the money wasn't.

"Six months later, we were named the best group home (by a state organization)," he says, still showing the earned pride of reviving Domus, which started in 1972 as a home for about 10 boys between ages 14 and 17.

Almost a quarter century later, Duggan handles a budget of about \$14 million and runs an organization that includes Chester Addison Community Center, Stamford Academy Charter High School, Trailblazers Academy Charter Middle School, afterschool programs, residential programs, a summer camp, juvenile justice center, mentoring programs and more.

Domus is Latin for "home." Duggan is fond of calling it "a cross between a boot camp and a summer camp."

These are not typical charter schools. There is no concern about top students being siphoned away from public schools, as Stamford Academy and Trailblazers are only for students dealing with significant -- sometimes profound -- challenges. This has raised criticisms of de facto segregation. Duggan counters by saying students' strides are apparent in year-to-year comparisons.

No one questions the commitment of Domus staff members for these children. The agency's motto, created by Duggan and his board two decades ago, is "No child shall be denied hope, love, or a fair chance in life." As he reviews his career during our conversation, Duggan expresses that sentiment in different ways every few minutes:

"I do it because, what is going to happen to them . . ." He doesn't need to finish the thought "if I don't."

"These are not 'Domus kids,'" he says, underscoring the point with air quotes. This unfinished thought is also clear: These are the children of our community.

"This is how to treat kids, with love."

"Everyone has stuff. They just have more stuff."

"When you kick them out, where do you think they are going to wind up?" He does complete this thought: "They are part of the city."

Duggan sees the alternative as a pipeline to prison. At heart, he's still a bouncer. These days, though, he's the big guy blocking the exit door.

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