

# TO IMPROVE THE HUMAN CONDITION WORLDWIDE: THE McMASTER SCHOOL AT DEFIANCE COLLEGE

Gerald E. Wood, Ed.D.  
President, Defiance College

## INTRODUCTION: THE CHILDREN

When we consider the human condition in both its local and global context, the stark schism between haves and have-nots is nowhere more apparent than in the plight of children. Victims of drought, war, political upheaval, natural disasters, malnutrition, and epidemic diseases, children are the most vulnerable of human beings. Yet, the irony becomes painfully real to those who confront their condition that those most vulnerable and most likely to perish are also those with the greatest potential for improving and even transforming their condition. Often a small intervention can make a profound difference in the lives and prospects of children.

The projects of the McMaster School for Advancing Humanity over the last several years have been overwhelmingly directed toward the benefit of children or the alleviation of their suffering. Why? Perhaps the urge to nurture, support, and protect our children is encoded in the DNA. Perhaps the human spirit, nurtured and directed through the liberal arts education at Defiance College, leads our students and faculty to seek justice and a fair chance for those least able to demand it for themselves. Or perhaps, faced with the abhorrent conditions under which so many people in our world live, it becomes imperative to focus on the hope that children always represent.

I have been profoundly moved by the images of children from the McMaster projects. The photographs of children in this *Journal* show the



PHOTO BY CRAIG RUTTER

joy, beauty, and potential of children even when living under the most adverse circumstances. They remind us that advancing humanity and alleviating human suffering are never abstract questions but impact immediately these most vulnerable members of our human family.

The education projects at Colegio Shaddai in Chiquimulilla, Guatemala, and Boeung Salang School in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, show the power of sustained focus on improving children's education. Our students and faculty have worked with teachers in these areas of great need to develop effective curricula and to share effective pedagogies. And it is in serving the world's children that our students discover their most profound educational experiences. The process of publishing the first written curriculum in Spanish for children at Colegio Shaddai deepened the professional skills and the personal commitments of the Graphic Design major who produced the project. The Art major who worked to assess and promote art education in one of the poorest regions of Jamaica remains to this day, several years after graduation, committed to providing art supplies for these schools.

The benefit of these projects to our students is clear: they must apply their content knowledge in completely new and challenging contexts, and solve complex problems in an unfamiliar environment. We know that action research is a good way to learn, but when it is applied directly and immediately to benefit a child or children, its power is incalculable, as many students remark in their project reflections, brief versions of which are included in the *Journal* articles.

The cliché is that “children are the leaders of tomorrow.” The reality is that for many of the children served by McMaster School projects, it remains an open question whether they will survive the health, economic, and political conditions of their home communities long enough to have a chance to make a difference. Anything we can do to even the odds for these children, in a sustained and sustainable way, improves the human condition and expresses the Purposes of the McMaster School for Advancing Humanity and the Defiance College Mission and Vision.

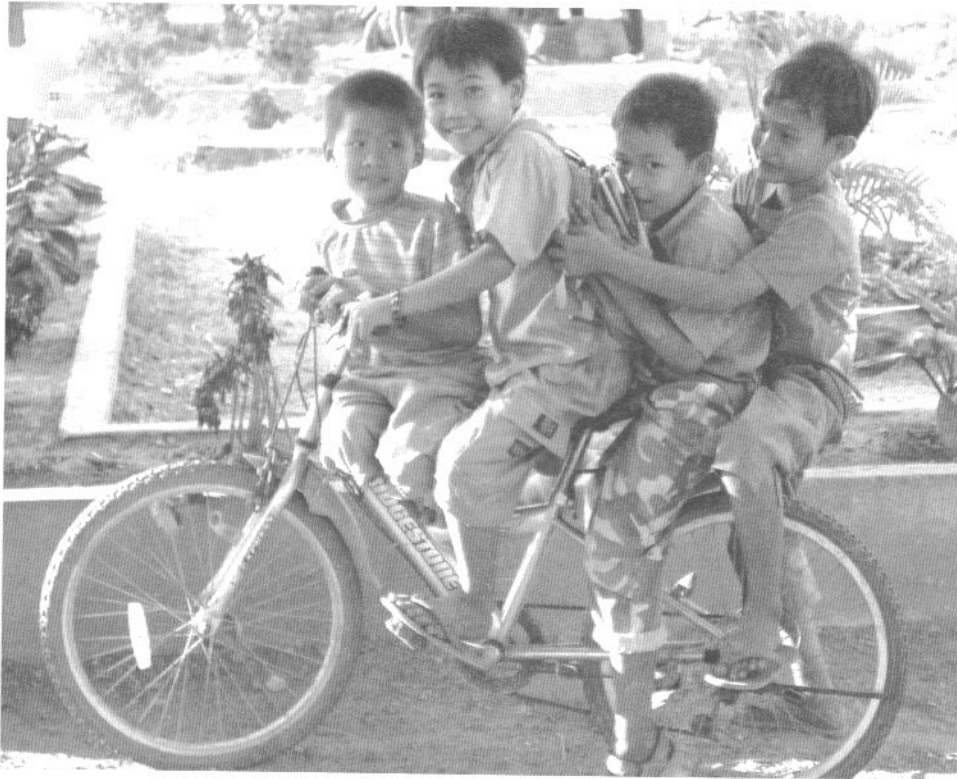


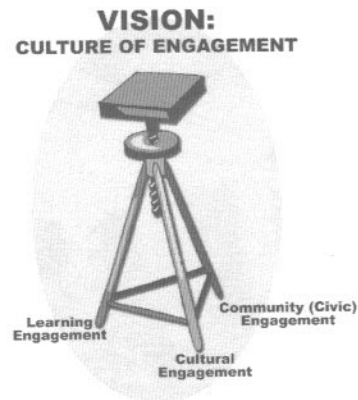
PHOTO BY KEN CHRISTIANSEN

## THE MCMASTER SCHOOL AND THE DEFIANCE COLLEGE MISSION AND VISION

Over a decade ago, Defiance College made explicit its commitment to a pedagogy of service, expressed in the four pillars of our Mission: “to know, to lead, to serve, to understand.” During my presidency, our emphasis has been on the creation of a “Culture of Engagement” that integrates deep academic learning with profound and transformative community involvement. I believe that our Culture of Engagement must be dynamic and responsive to the learning moments taking place every day. The discipline of the mind must be partnered with the inspiration of the heart. Knowledge learned in a classroom takes root and has deeper meaning for the student when it is put to work immediately in experiences that are real-world, morally challenging, and of tangible benefit to communities locally, nationally, and globally.

I find it useful to visualize the Culture of Engagement as relying equally upon three mutually-supportive educational legs:

- ◆ **learning engagement** - students do not merely *get* knowledge, they *make* knowledge;
- ◆ **community (civic) engagement** - students learn *why* and *how* to be democratic leaders through service learning, public learning, and experiential learning;
- ◆ **cultural engagement** - students learn to *appreciate*, *understand*, and *deal effectively* with other cultures in a global world.



The essence of our shared educational values at Defiance College is expressed well in the statement of Educational Philosophy created by our faculty: “Because superior learning is a natural outcome of learning with engagement, the college strives to ensure that traditional liberal education is actively connected to the real world. . . . [S]tudents are expected to combine knowledge and understanding with active leadership and service as they develop reasoning abilities, superior professional skills, a well-developed sense of self and moral judgment, and an understanding of their civic roles and responsibilities.”

The recognition that the future of our common civic enterprise depends on education for more than self interest is not new, but it has long been, and remains, difficult to achieve. George Bernard Shaw, in his inimitably cynical way, opines in the preface to the play *Misalliance* that: "The function of a university is not to teach things that can now be taught as well or better by University Extension lectures or by private tutors or modern correspondence classes with gramophones [*or the internet, we might add*]. We go to them to be socialized; to acquire the hallmark of communal training; to become citizens of the world instead of inmates of the enlarged rabbit hutches we call homes." (Shaw 1930, 37) This education of students to become citizens of the world is our communal mission and our perennial challenge. For Defiance College, those efforts have been aided immeasurably by the creation of the McMaster School for Advancing Humanity.

The McMaster School serves as a focal point around which have coalesced teaching, service, and scholarship to improve the human condition. The mission of the McMaster School is to educate students for responsible citizenship – to produce committed global citizens and leaders who understand the importance of individual liberty in improving the human condition worldwide and who will take an active role in addressing these issues through whatever professions they choose. The existence of the McMaster School makes possible invaluable opportunities for students to engage in scholarship and service, as well as for effective, sustained efforts to ameliorate human suffering worldwide.

The McMaster School provides direct funding for joint faculty-student projects through the competitive McMaster Fellow and Scholar Program. The international projects detailed in the articles to follow were conducted jointly by faculty McMaster Fellows and student McMaster Scholars who worked together to design, deliver, and report on original research projects explicitly intended to address the root causes of human suffering and improve the human condition.

The McMaster School also encompasses under its administrative umbrella all the College cohort programs focused on academic excellence and service, including: the Bonner Leader Program; the Citizen Leader Program; and the Carolyn M. Small Honors Program. The elements of the McMaster School for Advancing Humanity are illustrated on the diagram below, with the lines connecting those programs supported through the School's endowment; the other items are those College programs which have been strategically positioned within the McMaster School to ensure that its vision permeates their activities.



## THE FOUNDING FAMILY

The unique mission of the McMaster School results from the deeply-held values of this extraordinary family. Harold McMaster explained the impetus behind the creation of the School very clearly: "In our [his and wife Helen's] worldwide travels we noticed extreme poverty in lands which have natural resources as great as ours. This poverty must, therefore, be due to the way people treat each other." He believed that it was a duty to humanity to investigate the reasons behind such human suffering and search for ways to ameliorate it.

Harold and Helen McMaster met at Defiance College in the 1930s. Both hailed from nearby farming communities, Harold from Deshler, Ohio, where he and 12 siblings grew up on a tenant farm. Harold came to Defiance College on a full-tuition scholarship and later remarked that: "Without this help, I may not have been able to get a college education at all." After three years, Harold moved on to Ohio State University, having completed every science course then available at Defiance College.

A brilliant inventor, Harold went on to garner more than 100 patents dealing with glass bending and tempering, solar energy, and rotary engines. He was a member of the first class of inductees into the Ohio Science Hall of Fame along with other inventors Thomas A. Edison and Harvey J. Firestone. Harold and Helen have long been notable philanthropists, having significantly enriched the intellectual environment of Northwest Ohio through their generosity to the University of Toledo, Bowling Green State University, the Medical University of Ohio, and, of course, Defiance College.

The creation of the McMaster School through a six-million dollar endowment is one of many gifts to Defiance College, and it is one that has transformed the institution, allowing the College to make substantial progress toward realizing our goal of having 100% of Defiance College students participate in life-changing engagement experiences that prepare them to be responsible global citizens of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

Harold and Helen McMaster were married in 1937 and remained happily married for over 65 years until Harold's death in 2003. Harold contributed his time, energy, and wonderful intellect to Defiance College in many ways, including serving on and chairing the Board of Trustees. He and members of the family worked closely with the College to develop the McMaster School model. Helen McMaster continues to devote time and energy to realizing the vision of the McMaster School through serving on the McMaster School Advisory Board, as do her children and their spouses: Dr. Ronald McMaster and his wife Carolyn; Jeanine McMaster Sandwisch Dunn; Nancy McMaster Cobie and her husband Robert; and Alan McMaster and his wife Susan.

The McMaster family has made possible an exciting experiment in American higher education at Defiance College. This journal chronicles academic excellence resulting from a global laboratory. This is a pedagogy of hope and faith: hope for the children of our world and faith that the emerging generation of moral and professional leaders will make a difference in their world.

## REFERENCES

- Shaw, George Bernard. 1930. *The collected works of George Bernard Shaw*. Ayot St. Lawrence edited. Vol. 13, *Misalliance, The Dark Lady of the Sonnets, Fanny's First Play*. New York: Wm. H. Wise & Co.