

The Community School, a one-room schoolhouse in Remington thrives



Students at the community school in Remington. (Jim Burger/For City Paper)

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By **Jim Burger**

From the outside, it looks like a storefront, because it once was. Some old-timers in Remington still remember it as Mack's Corner Store, a place to buy groceries and household items. Every Baltimore neighborhood had a place like Mack's, the cornerstone of the community. And although it is long gone now, in its place sits a new cornerstone – the Community School. Inside, 16 high school age students sit at six tables arranged in a “U” shape. They work in absolute silence, figuring math problems from well-worn textbooks. They rise one by one to approach the lone teacher, who lords over them from a leather executive chair at the front of the room. On his desk, within reach, his laptop and cellphone constantly ping notifications of incoming texts and emails. He reviews a student's work and pats him on the back, “Good. Do another.” More

students line up. “Next. Next. Next. Keep it moving.” And so it goes for over an hour, always more lining up to have their work checked by “Mr. Tom.”

Mr. Tom is Tom Culotta, 61, a sturdy man with salt and pepper hair and an easy smile. He is a tireless dynamo, who 40 years ago sat down at his kitchen table to help his 12-year-old neighbor with his homework, and never stopped. Along the way he built an academic and mentoring high school with an accelerated three year program, approved by the Maryland Board of Education, and prepared hundreds of students to graduate from high school, go on to college, and lead stable, productive lives. The school gets no government funding, and survives through donations, a modest weekly tuition of \$25 per student, and fundraising, such as the sale of pizzas or Christmas wreaths. The roots of the school grew out of a need within the Remington community. In the late 1970’s the neighborhood children were dropping out of school at rates between 65% and 85%. Culotta started plucking kids off the street and tutoring them wherever he could – an abandoned building turned youth center at the corner of Lorraine Avenue and Howard Street or local church social halls. By January of 1982 he founded the Community School in the basement of the Church of the Guardian Angel, and moved it to its present home in 1998.

In those early years the school’s students were Culotta’s Remington neighbors, often dropouts. “Historically that was the case,” he says, “Many were not in good standing with other schools.” And school supplies came from unconventional sources. “For the first three months I taught reading from the newspaper, and writing using scrap paper scrounged from the John D. Lucas Stationary Store.” Those frugal practices still carry over today. Textbooks are a huge expense, and some in the school’s collection date from the 1980’s. “We’ll squeeze an education out of anything we have, and I would

challenge anyone to find a better government course than the one we teach. It's thorough, engaging, and relates to real life." The school day is a rigorous one; students often spend 10 hours in the classroom, and an additional three hours working at home. "They do it because they are committed. We have 16 kids with a totally, 100% individualized curriculum. That is a feat I'm very proud of."

It's not a 9 to 5 existence for anybody. Culotta makes the 10-minute drive from his Woodberry home and rolls in at 6:40am. Some students arrive by 7am and everyone must be in their seats by 7:55am. Class begins precisely at 8am and often Culotta will have the assembled recite the "Habits of the Community School Student" in unison: "Show up every day, on time, prepared to learn, with a positive attitude, and ALL your work." Officially the day ends at 4:30pm, but on any given day over half the pupils remain for hours longer, working on schoolwork or class projects. Culotta laughs, "I don't like to turn kids out, but I'm trying to get my workday down to 12 hours."

One of the seven members of the school's board of trustees is Ed Gavin. He was Culotta's first student sitting at that kitchen table in 1976, and now owns his own residential remodeling company. He says he serves on the board because he sees the school's influence on the community and the students. "The kids know there is a reward for hard work, honesty, integrity, and caring about more than just yourself. They are there for each other." Nor is Gavin timid when extolling the merits of the Community School itself, "The kids don't come in here like that, and anyone who has had a kid go here sees a change immediately."

Change was exactly what Justin Switzer saw; he too is a member of the board of trustees. He has lost count of how many times his family was evicted as a child, and was

homeless twice. “I was never a good student, and was put in special education because I couldn’t read until the third grade. I was involved in drugs and alcohol and came to the Community School because I had been kicked out of Poly (Baltimore Polytechnic Institute). Culotta recalls the day Switzer showed up for his interview. “Justin was wearing a ‘School Shooting Tour’ t-shirt, and I remember thinking to myself, “Is this some sort of test?”” Culotta pushed Switzer to do more with his life. “I don’t know why, but Tom saw the potential in me. He made me want to do better. I then had a sense of stability, support, and general well being. The school is based on everything I lacked at home.”

Switzer’s true mettle was tested after he earned his G.E.D. and enrolled at Stevenson College. He worked his morning job cleaning and restocking Long Johns Pub and then rushed home to prepare for his first day of class. When he arrived at his house on Morling Avenue all his belonging were on the sidewalk – his family had been evicted again. “I shoved everything I could into my book bag and went to school. That night I went to see Tom. I wanted to quit. But Tom talked me through it. He let me sleep at the school, and the next day I woke up and went back to college.” He eventually earned his Master in Library Science.

Today Switzer is the Teen Librarian at the Enoch Pratt Southeast Anchor Library in Highlandtown. He was recently invited to visit the White House in Washington D.C. to meet with the new Librarian of Congress and President Obama’s Senior Advisor on Education. They discussed innovative programming to make public schools function better with public libraries. Switzer never strays far from his past. “I’m invested in these young people’s lives just like Tom was invested in mine. Those are lessons I take to work

at the library every day.” As for Switzer’s opinion of Culotta, he is succinct: “Tom saved my life.”

Culotta estimates that over the years he’s taught between 500 and 700 students. From its inception the Community School was, in his mind, solely for the citizens of Remington. But over time he witnessed what he calls, “The Remington Diaspora.” Families have been priced out, broken up, or moved away. But they still need the school. Students now come not only from Remington, but also Hampden, Woodberry, Medfield, and farther afield. He also sees legacy students – children of former students have enrolled. The goals though, have remained constant. Culotta stresses his mantra, “Build a foundation for a happy and successful life...and that comes from choices. Don’t tolerate less and you’ll be happier.”

One student dispersed from the neighborhood was Kelsey Larrimore. She stands out in a crowd, for her cropped hair, hipster glasses, and a penchant for wearing high top Converse. A former resident of Remington Avenue, she moved away after her parents divorced. She now lives in Southwest Baltimore in a house she shares with her grandmother, mother, cousin, and cousin’s girlfriend. She attended Western High School, but left after failing 9th grade algebra. “This is a good fit for me. My grades were never this high at Western. I have a better relationship with my teachers here. My old ones didn’t care, so I didn’t care. I just went along.” Her commitment is evident in her commute. Larrimore gets up every day at 5am and rides two busses and the light rail to arrive at school, often before Culotta. She hopes one day to become a mental health counselor.



Mikey Poe was a product of the sometimes-dysfunctional Baltimore City public school system. He grew up in Hampden, attended the #55 Elementary School there, and was promoted from kindergarten thru 8th grade with low marks. His family enrolled him in the public charter school, Academy for College and Career Exploration (ACCE). He attended for two years and even finished the 10th grade before feelings of anxiety crushed him. “It was too big, overwhelming, and I couldn’t work it out. Somehow I got by.” His mother, Kimberly, recalls the stress of that time, “He wanted to quit school. I was crying. I didn’t want him to drop out. We brought him to talk to Tom, and he took a chance on Mikey.” Poe’s anxiety lessened. “I felt so comfortable from the moment I walked in. I should have been here from the beginning. It’s like a family. You can have a family with 20 students, you can’t have a family with 800.” He is also pragmatic about his situation -

at 18 years of age he is older than most high school students. “I know I should be out by now, and it bothers me sometimes. The point is, I’m getting it.”

Sadie Greenwood thrives at the Community School, and overcame long odds to do so. The Park Heights resident, now in her second year, did well in middle school, but felt disconnected in high school. She is candid about her failures; “I dropped out of City College after half a year, I dropped out of ConneXions School for the Arts after half a year.” Abby Markoe, Greenwood’s mentor since the 6th grade, became frustrated with her lack of success. “Sadie was very bright, and interested in school, but she needed the right school.” Markoe’s patience was also finite. “I told Sadie this was a huge stretch for me. You need to think about our relationship. You need to choose.” Greenwood recalls their telephone conversation as well, “She said this is my last chance with you and she was bringing me to the Community School. I just said yes to get her off the phone.”

Greenwood rises at 4am and rides the #27 bus to and from school. She remembers one particular trip home, “I got off the bus and there was a dead body on the corner. There were kids right there. That made me mad.” Greenwood lives on Cordelia Avenue, a violent area in Northwest Baltimore chronicled in a five-part series by Baltimore Sun reporter Justin Fenton. “I hear a lot about the murders, and it’s not that I’m used to it, but I’ve become numb.” The Community School is her solace: “When I leave my house I leave everything behind. When I’m here, I don’t think about what’s at home.” Markoe is optimistic about Greenwood’s future, “She’s a great writer, and I think she could do very well in whatever she goes into.” Greenwood also wonders about what lies ahead, “Something in the medical field. Maybe a nurse in labor and delivery, or hospice. I’m

fascinated with life and death.” Like Poe, Greenwood likens the school to kinsfolk, “We’re like a family,” then adds with a smile, “A big, weird, family.”

An urban atmosphere often finds its way into the daily lessons at the school, but Culotta uses it to his advantage to make a connection. He recently drew on personal experiences to illustrate problems with the central nervous system when teaching a period on biology. He spoke of the prevalence of drugs in the Remington of his youth, and seeing his neighbors snorting PCP, and inhaling aluminum siding cleaner or spray paint. “So many things can cause damage to your bodies, why do it to yourself?” Later the lecture turns to spinal cord injuries; two young women in the class tell stories about relatives getting shot and experiencing paralysis.

Before the meeting of the Community School board of trustees, Culotta and board member Jeanette Norris sit in the empty classroom eating peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. Norris, a Remington native, brings a lot of education experience to the table, having served as assistant principal at Chinquapin Middle School and currently teaching Special Education at the REACH! Partnership. “I’ve known Tom for as long as I can remember, but got involved with the school because of my nephew, Evan.” That nephew was Evan Green, who had lived all his life in Remington. He was failing in school and knew he was letting down his family. It was he who proposed attending the Community School. “He said to me, ‘If you let me attend Mr. Tom’s school I will exceed your expectations.’” Culotta remembers Green’s situation, “Evan was struggling in every way in his life back then, but performed very well here. He was a good student. This school has no back row where someone can be ignored.” Green was true to his word: after the Community School he attended the Baltimore City Community College and has joined

the United States Air Force. Norris stayed to serve on the board and praises the school's methods. "I see things here I wish I could reproduce in the city schools, but you can't reproduce this. She points to Culotta, "You have to have the heart of a leader."

One person who tried to reproduce what the Community School had was Dr. Andres Alonso, the CEO of the Baltimore City Schools from 2007-2013. He visited the school in 2008 and had long discussions with Culotta. "He tried to talk us into turning the Community School into a charter school, but we weren't interested in doing that." Finally, in 2010, Alonso took what he gleaned from Culotta and opened his own school on the site of the former Southeast Middle School, in Southeast Baltimore. He even went so far as to name the new school the Baltimore Community High School...a sore point with Culotta and his board. Their anger was short-lived, the Baltimore City School Board voted unanimously in November of 2015 to close the school in the summer of 2016.

Culotta is in no way alone in this endeavor. Besides his trustees he is backed up by a devoted band of enthusiasts. Peggy Lashbrook, an adjunct professor at the College of New Jersey, met Culotta in 2005. She was at a point in her life where she was looking to give back. "I thought maybe I could do some grant writing. I was the State Coordinator for the Delaware Program for Deaf-blind children. The Community School runs on only private funds, and I was familiar with finding resources." In time she became more involved and now makes the trip from her home in Elkton, MD twice a week, often bringing lunch for the students. She also teaches a course in job readiness along with fellow volunteer George Tilson. They have the pupils develop resumes and arrange meetings with role models and potential employers. Recently, Brad Chambers, the CEO of Union Memorial Hospital, had the group to his boardroom to discuss future

employment opportunities in health care. “Everything at the Community School is: How does your life relate to the outside world?” says Lashbrook, “Everything is about the connection.”

Like Lashbrook, volunteer Carol Berman was brought to the school by fate. “Thirteen years ago I came here for a visit. My church, St. John’s Methodist, had money to donate and I was sent to find a worthy recipient. I was so impressed I said if my committee doesn’t go for it I’ll give you \$500 myself.” Her committee did go for it and pledged \$5,000. Some years they’ve gone as high as \$10,000. Twice a month, before going to her job as a speech therapist in a nursing home, Berman brings a homemade lunch for the student body. She chuckles when one boy mentions that he had the same meal at his home the night before, but that doesn’t stop him from coming back for a second helping. She watches as they eat and clean their dishes, “Humanity and respect is brought out in this school. It is given and returned.”

Pizza and Christmas wreath sales notwithstanding, money for the school is a constant concern. Ken Bancroft spent his 17-year career at St. Agnes Hospital, first as its chief financial officer and later its president. He met Culotta in 2004, and his talents as a fundraiser were a godsend. He became actively involved in raising money from the beginning, and last year spearheaded the ambitious campaign to secure 3-year pledges, sufficient enough to hire a second fulltime teacher. Contributions arrived from individuals, the school’s network, social media, and a generous match from the Goldseker Foundation. In fewer than four weeks the first-year goal was met. Bancroft says success was never in doubt, “In many ways, the school sells itself.” Lashbrook

concur and laud the students, “If I can get a donor to come through the door, the kids will do the rest.”

The money pledged allowed for the hiring of Genira Nelson-Lewis, a Jamaican-born teacher, educated at Baltimore’s Morgan State University and currently working on her PhD at Howard University. Her presence relieves Culotta of having to teach every subject to every student. Each day, following a joint math class, Nelson-Lewis shepherds the first year students to a separate room that once served as the building’s garage. She gives instruction in English, health, science and geography. Culotta is pleased with the hire and her ability to integrate with the school’s philosophy. “She embraces the work ethic, embraces the grit, and encourages the students to have grit. I can teach the method, I can’t teach grit.”

Education at the Community school doesn’t begin and end with the duo of fulltime teachers. Culotta has, over the years, assembled a formidable volunteer faculty. Weekly and monthly seminars are taught on topics as varied as horticulture, creative writing, and financial literacy. Miko Veldkamp, a painter from the Netherlands, gives art instruction every Wednesday, and has begun walking students to the nearby Baltimore Museum of Art to serve as inspiration. Margaret Hart, from the Whiting School of Engineering of the Johns Hopkins University, approached Culotta about running a robotics seminar over three Saturdays. She and a group of her young engineers guided 10 students to build LED circuits and eventually assemble and program automated racecars. The class culminated with a hotly contested, timed, obstacle course. The school has long enjoyed a relationship with Johns Hopkins University. Lauren Zingaro is one of nine work-study students provided and paid for by the university. The sophomore saw a

posting for tutors on the bulletin board of the Center for Social Concern and took the position two years ago. “I love it here, working with the kids.” She also provides vital administrative help, making sure each student’s curriculum is up to date. Culotta is not shy about asking friends and acquaintances to come in as guest speakers. Recently Dr. Alan Scott, Professor of Microbiology and Immunology at the Bloomberg School of Public Health took time out of his day to lecture on malaria and infectious diseases. He is one of many who donate time to the school. “I don’t think people realize what a mass of people it takes to make this thing work,” says Culotta. Even the kids don’t realize it.”

Although the goal is for each student to leave the Community School and lead a stable, productive life, Culotta hopes that some will continue their education. Nine upper level students met with Ken Westary, the Vice President for Institutional Advancement at the Community College of Baltimore County. It was his first time visiting the school. They told him of their goals for the future, and he told them how CCBC could help achieve them. The college has a reputation for assisting first generation college students, paying special attention to those who don’t have a family history of higher education. He’s also frank about the sacrifices, “Sometimes you’ve got to leave your friends behind,” a nod to his own upbringing in West Baltimore’s Edmondson Village. Following his talk Westary was impressed by the caliber of education in the audience, “This is exactly what we recruit to.” And he was surprised at their backstories as well, “I would think most Baltimore City high schools would love these students. They’re so focused.”

It’s a little after 7am on a rainy Monday at the Community School. Already a few students are in their seats reading or working on laptops. All look up and say good

morning as more classmates come through the door. In spite of the early hour no one appears to be tired or unwillingly there. They place their cellphones in a box on the table near the door, to be retrieved only at lunch, or during infrequent breaks. One young lady reads a book she will report on later, a half-eaten bowl a cereal sits nearby. Culotta works quietly at his desk, then looks up to remind those students who worked during the previous year to bring their W2s with them on Friday and he will help them do their taxes. One worked at Burger King, another at Giant Foods, and still another had a summer job at the Real Food Farm in Clifton Park. Culotta finishes grading a test and announces that a student has passed test number nine in his 20-test course. Everyone pauses to applaud, and then the room grows silent again. Culotta surveys the scene, and only when prodded speaks of himself: "I'm thankful for every day I'm here. It's an honor to live a life of meaning." The clock on the wall reads 8am, and the Community School is now in session.