

Plaza Academy educates teenagers who were tough-luck cases elsewhere

By Bridget Heos
Special Correspondent

The halls are subdued on Tuesday morning at The Plaza Academy. Betsy, the art teacher, has taken her students on an impromptu field trip to the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art. But then, quiet is the norm at the city's only private special education school.

Located in the former Guardian Angels school building, the academy educates 50 to 70 students a year, including gifted students who failed in other schools, kids with Attention Deficit Disorder, learning disabilities and Asberger's Syndrome, and other students who didn't do well in traditional settings.

Of course, silence is made to be broken.

"Stop acting weird," Seabaugh good-naturedly tells a student who is making noise in the hallway. They josh around a little. Then Seabaugh returns to his office and the hall is quiet again.

The hush seems like an anomaly. The Plaza Academy educates teenagers who were tough-luck cases elsewhere. The student who flunked out of private school. The kid who grew out of public school. Regulars at detention. Dropouts. Special education kids who need a guiding hand.

But here's what these kids have in common: They're sweet kids, Seabaugh says. They're nice to their mothers. They want to do a good job in school. It's

Quiet success



PHOTO: BRIDGET HEOS

STACI JEFFERIES, a senior at Plaza Academy, listens to a lecture by Dr. Gary Seabaugh.

just not in the cards until they come here.

A history lesson helps explain the academy's success. In 1974, parents rented a Plaza church activity center and hired a university student to educate their children, who had struggled in traditional schools. Tuition was \$85 a month.

Three years and three directors later, the school faced bank-

ruptcy. That's when the parents hired Seabaugh. Though just 30 years old, Seabaugh had already received three Purple Heart Medals and the Silver Star for combat service in the Vietnam War. Now he was pursuing a Ph.D. in developmental and child psychology at the University of Kansas.

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"What you had then was the upstart KU student who wanted to teach self-management to students," Seabaugh recalls.

In 1978, the school received a \$30,000 federal research grant to do just that. "It was true experimental teaching," Seabaugh says.

The experiment has worked for 30 years. In addition to being a social service agency and an accredited high school for exceptional and gifted students, The Plaza Academy is still a research institute.

It removes the variables kids rebel against, such as uniforms, a tedious school day and a closed-door policy. "We've created the college life for them. This controls gratuitous rebellion," Seabaugh says.

The school day works like this: The students attend six classes a day. Each class is divided between lecture, discussion and an assignment. During seventh period study hall, teachers are free to help

students.

Kind of like a traditional school, right? But here's where it differs: Students can leave campus for lunch. If they are on time, finish their assignment and don't disturb other students, they can also leave class early. If the whole day goes that way, they can leave school after sixth period.

"You just go to study hall here if you need to study," Seabaugh says.

And finally, if the whole school earns above 95 percent on behavior for the week, then on Friday. That happens often. "The school has a legacy of respect and kids acting nice," Seabaugh says. "They love their teachers, and who wouldn't?"

Teachers, a few of whom could be mistaken for students, go by their first names here, and their classes have only about 10 students in them. "It's kind of like a friendship with the teacher. They're not an authority fig-

PLAZA ACADEMY
Accreditation: The North Central Association of Colleges and Schools.

Tuition: \$8,500
Financial Aid: Available to those who need it

ure. They're not waiting for you to fail," says 15-year-old Ari Silver.

In a Shawnee Mission public school, he says, he had the most detentions in his class. He had a lot of friends but argued with teachers. Here, he says, those arguments are more like discussions. "You're actually heard," he says. "Even if you don't want to hear someone's opinion you're going to anyway."

"The first amendment is really important around here," adds junior Aaron Yockey.

When Silver and Yockey first came to The Plaza Academy, they say, they missed their friends. But that changed quickly.

"It's like your parents got a divorce and now you have to meet your stepfather's family," says Yockey of graduating from a Catholic grade school to The Plaza Academy. "Now this is my second family."

His family chose the school because he had learning and homework trouble, Yockey says. Having no written homework is one of his favorite things about the school. But it has helped him in other ways, too.

"I have become a very, very social and likable person," he says.

Kids often come here after trying a traditional school, Seabaugh says. They're embarrassed and hopeless.

Some are disillusioned with the tough guy mentality in high school. "These are kids who go to church with their mothers on Sunday and they don't want to deal with that,"

says Seabaugh.

Others have gotten lost in the crowd, as was the case with a boy flunking at a private school. "You put him in a place where he can be a big shot and he'll blow the lid off the place," Seabaugh recalls. The student went on to be the lead dancer in a prestigious company.

Over the last 15 years, 80 percent of Plaza graduates have gone on to college, Seabaugh says. But more importantly to him, they do well there. Among graduates are a politician, a news broadcaster, a real estate executive, a film student and the entire leadership staff of a well-known local restaurant.

Based on the way his table was treated when he dined there with out of town guests, Seabaugh says, the guests thought he must be the king of Kansas City.

If his alumni treat him well now, they're simply returning the favor. Seabaugh doesn't just teach English, he douses it with philosophy during his

writing and reasoning class. He doesn't teach typical physical education, he instructs Hakeido. And he doesn't just care about Plaza students, he counsels their family members, too.

If The Plaza Academy is a second family, Seabaugh is the dad. His rules are simple: "You can't act stupid. You can't cuss. You can't sass the teacher," he tells students.

And mom? That would be Charlene Hollingsworth, the school office administrator.

"She brings a new meaning to tough love," a student says.

And she's been involved in the school almost as long as Seabaugh. Her son and grandson attended school here.

"They get the attention here that they should get everywhere," she says.

And it's tough to get lost in the crowd at a school this small. At other schools, Silver says, "It's all divided. Here it's only one group. We have Goths. We have preppy kids. We have jocks. Everyone's together."