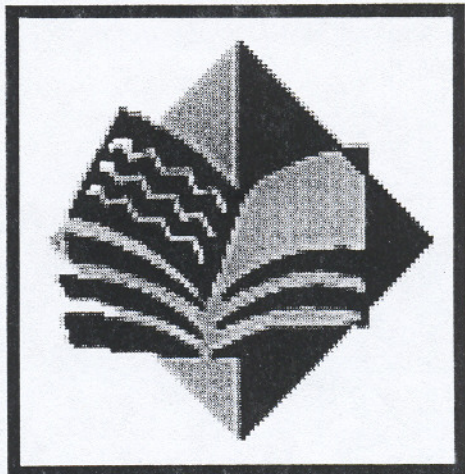


## Plaza Academy

By Robert Roudebush



ver-Star holder), is still its current director. Dr. Seabaugh ("Gary" to students and staff alike) says of his approach: *"The Plaza Academy is more like a college than a high school. We have a number of policies that encourage our students to behave in an adult manner. For example, our students address their teachers by first name to encourage rapport. Also, we do not ring class bells. Instead, we train our teenagers to be punctual. To further enrich the school environment, we operate an open school in order to teach our students to leave and return to campus in a timely manner, as they soon will in college."*

The Academy currently resides in spaces at Guardian Angels Church, 4232 Mercier, Kansas City, Missouri, just north of Westport Road, in Midtown. Phone (816) 561-0770. Each of the small corps of instructors is academically multi-versed and state certified, and the North Central Association of Colleges

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**T**he Plaza Academy is by no measure like any other school in Kansas City and that explains its success. Private, with annual tuition (around eight thousand dollars – scholarships and other aid available) and a select student body (seventy or less) the alternative

middle and high school could claim pretentiousness. It doesn't. What it does with high percentage regularity is turn out self-disciplined high school graduates who are prepared and eager to tackle college. Ninety-five percent of attendees graduate, and seventy percent of them matriculate to colleges and universities.

The alternative school – sometimes referred to as "last chance high" – has been doing college preparation since 1974. It's founder, Gary O. Seabaugh, PhD, (Vietnam combat vet, Sil-

and Schools accredit the school itself.

At the Plaza Academy, observers are welcome and frequent. They include parents looking in, potential students checking it out. The place is quieter than one recent observer remembered his high school days. In addition to no bells, there are also no banging lockers. Needed books are kept in classrooms. There are fewer backpacks to carry, no reason to say, "I forgot my book." Written work is largely done in class under close supervision - little homework and even less reason to say, "I lost my homework." Six to twelve students per class is typical and increased teacher attention results in decreased cries of "I didn't get my question answered."

**Of course** students laugh and joke and flirt as they move from class to class, calling greetings and questions. There is no dress code. Shortly, it becomes obvious that casual here does not allow sloppy or offensive. The only restriction - don't wear anything which detracts from learning. Pupils often munch snacks and drink from private bottles of water in class, but they do so quietly and at classes end, the rooms are not trashed. Cell phones are permitted but students step out the room discreetly to speak. Even a recent sneezer excused himself to the hall with tissues so as not to interrupt a tutorial. Casually dressed instructors remind a visitor more of confident college professors than typically harried teachers policing rooms and

monitoring halls.

No one pretends Plaza Academy students are angels. Nor is this learning establishment for everyone, financial considerations aside. There are no sports teams or proms, no senior plays. The discipline here is mostly self-administered. Students are referred from other school coun-



silors, doctors and therapists, even members of the courts system aware of the Academy's rep for turning young people around. Gaining entry is not easy - the process involves interviews with Dr. Seabaugh, members of the staff and parental input and involvement to a degree some participants have not seen previously. Prospective students look in on classes for several days. Why come to the academy when other schools, public and private have failed? Some applicants are simply too gifted and bored by standard school rote. Others have learning deficiencies or aggressive behavior problems. Low self-esteem or problems at home often target them as

losers no one can help. For most who enter the Academy, that all changes.

Dr. "Gary" again: "We provide a high school in which parents and teenagers work together to achieve academic, social and familial success - Our therapeutic curriculum teaches teenagers to manage themselves rather than rely on others to manage them." How is that done? Partly by keeping parents informed DAILY in writing of student class attendance, punctuality, deportment and subject mastery. Parents are also informed WEEKLY of student's actual grade point level, and once a week, the entire student body gets together in one conference room to talk things over - solve problems, set goals, ask questions.

For students, there are some attractive carrots at the end of this reporting stick. Those finishing in-class work early and well are able to leave class and spend the time as they wish. Continued good work grants the option of skipping end of the day "seventh-hour study hall" altogether. And further good work can "buy" the student time off from school, and even "buy out" of final exams. Each student also knows his or her cumulative work affects a reward system benefiting or penalizing the entire student body.

The Plaza Academy is pragmatic, enlightened self-interest with a heart and mind - and for the students who attend, it works.