

THE BRIDGE

Connecting the Fair Haven Community

Fall 2005

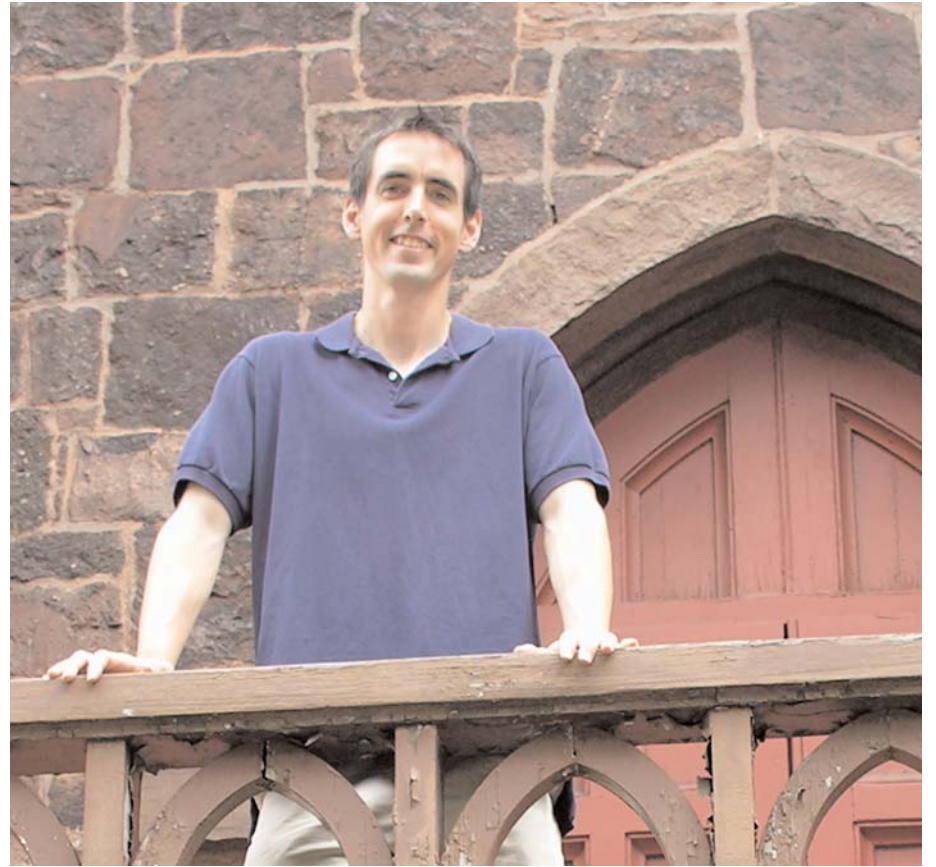
GOOD NEIGHBORS

Sharing Faith, Hope and Charity

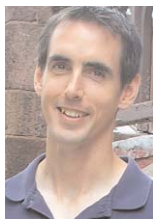
The Purposeful Life of Alex Johnston

SINCE ALEX JOHNSTON SETTLED IN NEW HAVEN OVER SEVEN YEARS AGO, HE HAS BEEN APPLYING HIS IMPRESSIVE TALENTS AND INTELLECT TO EFFECT SOCIAL CHANGE HERE IN THE LOCAL COMMUNITY.

That community has extended statewide now that Mr. Johnston is executive director for *Connecticut Coalition for Achievement Now*, an advocacy group working toward solving critical problems in the state's public school systems. The young organization he leads seeks to build public consensus for the type of real change necessary to provide all children—regardless of economic or social conditions—with an excellent education and opportunity to reach their potential. According to Alex, alongside a family history of public service, it is the conviction of his faith that inspires him to work hard to further social justice.



St. James' Vestry Member Alex Johnston pauses for a moment at the main entryway of the church.



In the late nineties, Alex Johnston returned to New England fresh from the University of Oxford in England, where he was working on his Doctoral thesis in Political Science as a prestigious Rhodes Scholar at Lincoln College. Alex

had previously graduated *summa cum laude* from Harvard on a Truman Scholarship for public service, earning his degree in Social Studies, and writing his undergraduate thesis on the politics of subsidized housing in suburban Massachusetts. Now, with the promise of a job opportunity working in a non-profit organization in Rhode Island, Alex was happy to be back close to his native Amherst, Massachusetts and ready to put all his specialized knowledge to work. However, like so many non-profit sector jobs, the funding ran out, and Alex found himself staying on the couch of some old Oxford friends here in New Haven, looking for other opportunities.

Accomplished in woodworking, Alex decided to combine his knowledge of building methods and his impulse to serve by devising a construction training program with Urban Solutions, a New Haven based organization that offered at-risk youth opportunities to learn building skills. Alex has plenty of experience in using his building expertise to help others. While a student in England, Alex founded that country's first campus chapter of Habitat for Humanity, the non-profit, ecumenical Christian organization made famous worldwide by former President Jimmy Carter and wife Rosalynn. Since its founding in 1976, Habitat for Humanity International has built and rehabilitated more than 150,000 houses, working with families in need to address the issues of housing for the poor.

In 2001, Alex joined the Housing Authority of the City of New Haven as an Asset Manager, soon becoming its Director of Operations. When

Johnston arrived, he joined a new leadership team just beginning to turn the agency around from the brink of receivership. Responsible for 2,400 public housing apartments and a staff of 85, Alex helped direct many important changes that resulted in better and faster maintenance service to residents and a significant improvement in public safety in many of the communities managed by the agency.

Last year, Alex could not resist an exciting opportunity to help close the achievement gap that now exists between students in Connecticut's cities and suburbs as the executive director of a new advocacy organization, the Connecticut Coalition for Achievement Now, or *ConnCAN*. Inspired by the success of Amistad Academy here in Fair Haven (see RIGHT AROUND THE CORNER on page two) and other successful public and charter schools across the nation, Johnston's organization is dedicated to building a partnership of parents, educators and community leaders in order to make high-performing public schools available to all children in the state. Alex explains, "All too often we have lost faith in the power of our public schools to meet all children where they are and set them on the path to life

success. We have seen that there are schools that succeed with all children regardless of their circumstances. So we must reject the notion that poverty and other social ills are an acceptable excuse for the institutional failure of so many urban schools."

Alex possesses a prodigious capability to do community work. In 2003, he founded the City Point Historic District Neighborhood Association and as president, he helped build a coalition of community groups that successfully changed the DOT's planned highway ramps for I-95, protecting the neighborhood from increased traffic. Johnston also sits on the board of the New Haven Preservation Trust. As a member of the vestry at St. James' Church Alex is helping to steer and grow his place of worship. He and his fiancée Caroline visited a number of churches in the city before they discovered in St. James' a compelling intercultural community with a strong commitment to acting out Christian faith in service to others.

For further information on *ConnCAN*, visit their website: conncan.org

✠ St. James' Response Card Please, let us hear from you!

I would like to make the following comments on this issue of *The Bridge*:

I would like to request prayers from the church for the following:

I would like a pastoral visit from the church.

I would like to make a tax-deductible donation to the ministry of St. James' Church in Fair Haven. Enclosed is a check for the following amount: \$ _____

Name:

Address:

Telephone:

E-mail:

Please clip and mail to: St. James' Church, 62 East Grand Avenue, New Haven, CT 06513
(Or, better yet, drop it by the church office anytime.) **Thank you!**



HISTORICAL HAVEN

THE CONTINUING SAGA OF PUBLIC EDUCATION

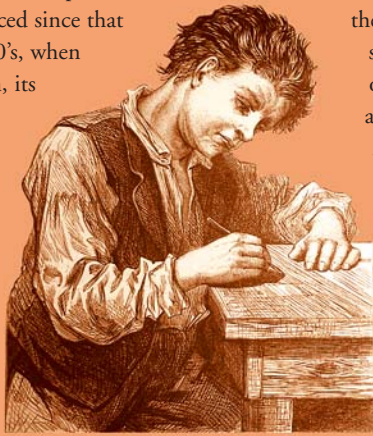
Almost two hundred years ago, in 1808, public education was first introduced to the Fair Haven community when Captain Nathaniel Grannis deeded three quarters of an acre of property to build a school and meetinghouse at the corner of Grand and Clinton Avenues, the present site of Strong School. It was the first of many of the neighborhood's public schools to be built, remodeled, or replaced since that modest beginning and in the early 1870's, when Fair Haven was annexed to New Haven, its schools became part of the city's Department of Education.

With the large wave of immigration—which changed Fair Haven in the early part of the 20th Century—the need for additional schools pushed the development of many new facilities. The neighborhood continued to expand rapidly for fifty years and it was during the years immediately following World War II that the city of New Haven's number had grown to its largest. By the end of the decade in 1950 the city's population peaked at 164,443¹. However, like so many other urban centers in post World War II America, the trend was towards movement to the suburbs and so populations began their steep decline in the neighborhoods of New Haven. By 1960 the total population had fallen by over twelve thousand.

For the next thirty years, Fair Haven and other neighborhoods in New Haven witnessed a growing trend towards so-called "white flight," a form of quiet discrimination that increasingly contributed to public schools with fewer resources and escalating social problems.

In 1971, the Supreme Court ruling upholding forced busing certainly was another contributing factor to the

exodus of whites from this and other northern urban communities, and the issue of public school desegregation continues to impact boards of education. However, New Haven has had success in discouraging white flight from its schools. Now, after years of decline, enrollment is beginning to grow at New Haven's schools, due largely to the creative schooling options they provide in the form of magnet schools. According to U.S. Department of Education reports, academic success among students at most magnet schools in New Haven has risen. Magnet schools have now been a part of alternative choices since the 1980s, and look to be here to stay.



There are educational activists who believe that the public schools could do much better and are succeeding in building successful learning environments across the country in the form of charter schools. These are public schools

created via a legal charter—generally with an express purpose, and controlled independent of the local school district. Perhaps the most famous of these is Amistad Academy right here in Fair Haven which has garnered major national attention for its winning methodology. (See the adjacent RIGHT AROUND THE CORNER article.) In fact, the school was the subject of a recent PBS documentary entitled *Closing the Achievement Gap*. Visit pbs.org for more information.

The following sources were the basis for this article:
Fair Haven. *A Journey through Time* ©1976 by Doris B. Townshend
New Haven Public Schools website: www.nhps.net
U.S. Department of Education website: www.ed.gov
Wikipedia website: www.wikipedia.org
Yale Herald website: www.yaleherald.com

RIGHT AROUND THE CORNER

Sweating The Small Stuff

In the debate over bridging the "achievement gap" in urban schools, one local middle school has caught the attention of both the educational community and the national media. Amistad Academy, a charter school on James Street here in Fair Haven, is defying the ill-conceived notion that children from urban settings cannot perform on par with their suburban counterparts.



Opened in the fall of 1999, and now the flagship school of a growing number of Achievement First schools, Amistad was the brainchild of a group of Yale Law School students. They were inspired to create a public charter school after their in-depth study of urban education revealed some shocking statistics—like the fact that urban students were 21 times more likely to dropout than were suburban students. The outcome has been remarkable. On standardized test results, Amistad students (comprised of 97 percent blacks and Latinos) are matching, and exceeding, suburban students. After two years, 81 percent of Amistad eighth-graders achieved "mastery" in reading on the state test, compared with 31 percent of New Haven students, making it one of the highest-performing schools in the state. Secretary of Education Rod Paige called Amistad "quite possibly the nation's best charter school."

What is the secret of Amistad's success? Perhaps it is the strict reward and punishment system that emphasizes academic performance, and the expectation of mutual respect and dedication to hard work. Students and parents must sign contracts promising to live up to the school's high standards for dress, attendance, and homework. According to Achievement First Superintendent Doug McCurry—one of the school's founders—attention to detail is vital. "We fight the small battles so we don't have to fight the big ones." One of their favorite slogans is "We sweat the small stuff!"

All New Haven students are eligible to attend and are selected in a blind lottery by the New Haven Public Schools Magnet Office. Interested parents should contact the Magnet Office directly at (203) 946-7415.

For more information on Amistad visit their website: www.achievementfirst.org

Pastoral Reflections

Teaching Moral Values in School



BY THE REV. GEOFF LITTLE
PASTOR, ST. JAMES' CHURCH

Well, the kids are back in school. And this year more than ever moral values appear in the teachers' lesson plans.

It used to be that public schools stuck with reading, writing, and arithmetic and left character building to the parents. Now some curriculum in public schools (Christian schools have always done this) is at least partly character-based—teaching decency and kindness alongside vowels and consonants.

Beyond that, a number of new schools are being founded with instruction on morals at the forefront of their pedagogy. The fine new charter school where my wife, Blanca, is a teacher displays the acronym "REACH"—Respect, Enthusiasm, Achievement, Citizenship and Hard Work—in every classroom, and at weekly REACH assemblies students who demonstrate these values receive special awards.

What is the gospel perspective on this trend? On one hand, the good news of Jesus Christ inaugurating the coming of the kingdom of God into the world leads quite naturally to the promotion of moral values. For

this reason there is an abundance of virtue lists in the Bible. The Apostle Peter wrote: "For this reason, make every effort add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, love" (2 Peter 1:5-8). Thus teaching moral values is, in itself, perfectly consistent with the revelation of God and should not be discouraged.

On the other hand, the Bible is clear that teaching moral values from a secular perspective only goes so far. The world is content with good character; what God demands, however, is godly character. And godliness, as the Apostle makes clear above is built on a personal faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. From the Christian perspective we cannot rely on the world's teaching of moral values to accomplish anything of spiritual, eternal worth.

Thus my message to parents about moral values being taught in our schools is this: "Wonderful!" Let's welcome it, but please understand its limitations. Character-based education may help create a better learning environment for our kids, but it will in no way provide the path to spiritual transformation. Godly character comes only through faith in Jesus Christ in the fellowship of the church, and your kids' exposure to Jesus remains your own responsibility.

Family Matters

Fall Youth Programs Begin

BY BETSY HAUGH
DIRECTOR OF CHILDREN
AND FAMILY MINISTRIES,
ST. JAMES' CHURCH

September is a very exciting time for our **Children's Programs at St. James'**. The quiet

of summer will give way to the cheerful noise of busy children at work and play in the classrooms. The **Children's Programs** are open to all neighborhood youth.

The **Literacy Program** is expanding to three classes this year. We will be offering literacy support to children in grades Kindergarten through third. These free classes will meet on Saturday afternoons from 2 p.m. to 4 p.m. Registration will be held at the annual Pastor's Picnic for the Community behind the church on Saturday, September 10, and classes begin the following Saturday September 17.



Our **Sunday Classes** will be offered each week for children ages 4-12. Through stories, music, games, and crafts, the children will learn about God,

what He has done for them, has to say to them, and how He is involved in their daily lives.

For older youth, **Poiéma**, the program for teens, continues on the second, third, and fourth Sundays of every month. All teenagers, ages 13-18 are welcome.

For information on the literacy program and Poiéma, call Blanca Little at 203-467-6083. Please contact Betsy Haugh at 203-469-6087 to learn more about the Sunday classes.

Created for the Fair Haven community by



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THE BRIDGE FALL 2005

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On the web at: tomshultz.com

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COMMUNITY AND CHURCH CALENDAR FALL 2005

Service every 1st Sunday
10 AM: Sermon and Holy Communion, bilingual.
Community lunch after the service.

Services every 2nd, 3rd, 4th and 5th Sundays
10 AM: Sermon and Holy Communion, English language.
12 NOON: Sermon and Holy Communion, Spanish language.

Pastor's Picnic for the Community: Saturday, Sept. 10, 12-4 PM, St. James' Church.
Community Thanksgiving Dinner: Thursday, Nov. 24, 1 PM, St. James' Church.

St. James' Literacy Program: Saturdays, 2-4 PM, at the Church. September-June for kids ages 5-8. Call Blanca Little, (203) 467-6083.

Boy Scouts: Mondays 7-9 PM, St. James' Church. Call Bill Mason at (203) 469-0786

Alzheimer's Support Group: Every 1st Wed., 7 PM, The Mary Wade Home, 118 Clinton Ave. Call Rosanne Mondrone, (203) 562-7222

City Farmers' Market: Every Thursday, July - October, Quinipiac River Park.

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