



Good News from the Inspired Youth Tutoring Program 2005

"O little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie."

"Is Bethlehem real?" 8-year old Belinda asked after singing the carol in Youth Choir practice. Few children in the Tutoring Program ask questions like that. "Yes, Bethlehem is very real," I answered. Earlier the same day, while walking to choir practice, Belinda said of another child, "He's breaking the 3rd commandment." ("Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain.") Belinda goes to confirmation classes at a Catholic church on Saturdays. She had memorized the Ten Commandments and knew what they meant! We talked about the commandment and what the boy had said. A few minutes later she said, "___ is breaking the 9th commandment." ("Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor."-- "You must not lie.") Later she asked, "What does 'vain' mean?" I stood in awe of her deep thinking.

Two weeks earlier there had been other surprises. Coming out of school, preparing to go to afternoon tutoring, Belinda was holding a "chapter book" open to the page she had been reading. Some children walk around with a book open to the page they are reading, but *no one in the Tutoring Program!* The book was a *Magic Tree House* book. She said she had read two books in the series, so we showed her where *The Magic Tree House* books were in the library, and she checked out four more. A week later she confided, "Something is wrong with me. I only like *The Magic Tree House* books. I don't like any other books." We put that in context and eased her worries.

We are especially proud of Belinda because her mother had been in the tutoring program when she was a child. Her mother had been very quiet, hardly noticed among her noisy, older brothers and sister, and now she wanted her daughter to have the same good things that she had had growing up. We are proud that Belinda, the daughter of a tutoring grad, is doing so well. The influences of the Tutoring Program are strands in the weavings of the lives of many children and families.

"Above thy deep and dreamless sleep the silent stars go by."

Jemi (7th gr.) has been in the Tutoring Program for 5 years. All these years he has hardly said a word, and when he does say something, it's in a whisper. At the end of his first year in the program, when he was 2nd grade, his mother had him tested for a special ed. class at school. He had a wonderful teacher at school the following years. In 6th grade he was assigned to a mainstream class, and did well. Last spring he wrote some things in his tutoring journal about Africa, which he learned from watching the Olympics on TV. The tutors liked it and suggested the whole program do an emphasis on Africa this year, which we've begun with a Family Night celebrating Africa. When asked to write something on Africa for our next magazine, Jemi wrote a complete article on Ethiopia. In our first year of the program, 1985, a mother said, "These children are like diamonds in the rough. All they need is polishing and they will gleam."

"Yet in thy dark streets shineth the everlasting light."

Flora (4th gr.) came to the U.S. a year ago and entered our program in October as a 3rd grader. She couldn't understand, speak, or read English. She couldn't add or subtract above 10. By December, she could understand a little English, speak a few words, and add and subtract above 10. By May she could understand and read English, but she still preferred to speak in Spanish.

In October 2004 Flora would not obey the tutors; she wouldn't even look in their direction when they spoke her name. She was always getting into trouble. She got into fights with one student after another. By spring, she started obeying the tutors a little, and she began to get along with more students. This year she has become a leader. She helps younger children. She picks up the folders and organizes them. She hardly gets into fights any more. She communicates in English. We realized that all last year Flora didn't miss a single tutoring session, choir practice, or concert.

"The hopes and fears of all the years"

In September 2004 a few youth started singing in Eleanor Bilby's living room. Their voices were scratchy, there was no tone, and the voices were on strange pitches. In December 2004 we began practicing at Edgewater Presbyterian Church. We kept singing all year. The voices developed. Once a month we sang in concerts, at nursing homes and in festivals. Around 50 children and youth participated.

But a problem developed. Conflicts arose between the African American and Hispanic students. Some African American students accused Beth Palmer of being racist. We tried method upon method to get the children to work together. One student brought in Bible verses for the choir members to read. People from several churches prayed for the children. The children and their parents gave suggestions. Children of different ethnic groups were asked to do a task together. Parents' nights included all different families. Gradually things began to open up. Children began talking with each while walking to and from choir practice. Some children said they missed children from another ethnic group when they weren't there. And the choir sounded beautiful! (*There's more on our website.*)

In September 2005 new students came to sing in the choir. We sang for nursing homes in October and December. More students keep coming – some with good voices!

"Are met in thee tonight."

In December 2005 we were asked to bring 8 students to the City Council Chambers in downtown Chicago to "sing for Mayor Daley" and to have each student prepare a short speech saying how the tutoring program had been important to them. Inspired Youth had applied for a grant from the Lend-a-Hand Fund of the Chicago Bar Association, and through that we were one of three nominees for the 2006 Much Shelist Founders' Award. Much Shelist is a prominent firm of attorneys in Chicago.

The kids were so excited to get to go downtown. They wrote their speeches, which had to be approved by the Mayor's Committee on Special Events. Two students were chosen to speak, Fabricio and Jasmine T. They practiced and practiced. We chose "Count on Me," to sing.

On the day of the trip (also Chicago's first big snowfall), the CBA sent a shuttle to pick us up. The kids were great the whole time, including Flora and Belinda. Five tutor/mentors came to the ceremony to support the kids.

Mayor Daley opened with warm remarks telling how important education was and comparing our system with China's. Awards were given to 17 organizations. We sang "Count on Me," which went beautifully. Fabricio and Jasmine went to the microphone and said their speeches loudly and with poise. Everyone was proud of them. Inspired Youth was given the 2006 Much Shelist Founders' Award, which included a monetary gift. Afterwards the kids said, "We won the prize! We won the prize!" Waiting in the shuttle after the ceremony was a large bundle of fancy gingerbread people for each child from Much Shelist. It was a very happy evening.

In celebrating the faiths of the students, tutor/mentors, and supporters of Inspired Youth, we say,
May Ramadan be filled with awe and humility.
May Christmas be filled with compassion and joy.
May Hanukkah be filled with light and justice.
May Kwanzaa be filled with community and service.

*From Beth Palmer, Director of the Inspired Youth Tutoring Program and the Inspired Youth Singers
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