

Making CONNECTIONS

Sycamore native's program tries to bust stereotypes

By DAVE MANN
Staff Writer

CHICAGO — When Dan Bassill left Sycamore 30 years ago, he had no idea he would leave a successful career in advertising to lead a program in Chicago, helping kids living in the Cabrini Green housing project.

Bassill started Cabrini Connections, an after-school tutoring and mentoring program, in 1992. Interested kids from Cabrini Green are assigned an adult volunteer, who helps them with their schoolwork and is, simply, someone to hang out with.

The roots of Bassill's efforts to help others began while he was in college, studying history, after he graduated from Sycamore High School in 1964.

"Sycamore is not a very racially mixed town, and I've lived in other small towns," he said. "I was just as naive about the issues as many other people."

Bassill tried to join a fraternity, but he was turned down and ended up in another fraternity, lower in terms of social status. The quality of a fraternity was measured by success in athletics, Bassill said, so he and some others tried to recruit better athletes.

"I began to say, 'There is a group of students no one is recruit-

ing,' and those were the black students," he said. "It wasn't a question of equality; it was a question of quality. If we were leaving out a group of people who had the skills to make us better, then we weren't competing effectively."

When he began recruiting black students, Bassill ran into "issues of racism" in his own fraternity, which he fought for the next couple of years.

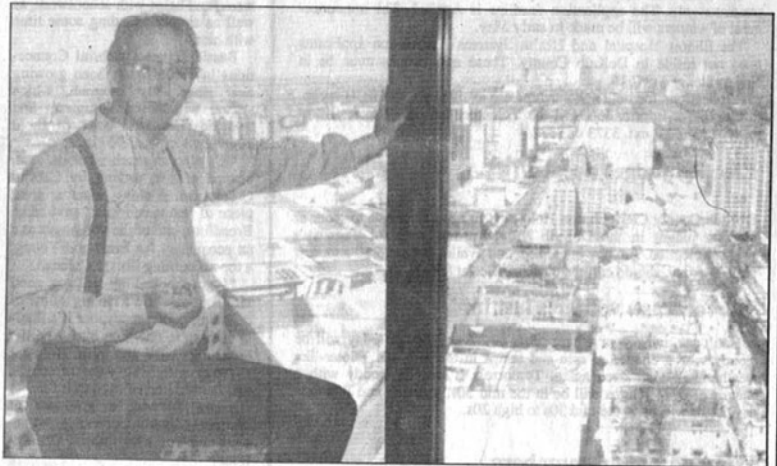
"That set a foundation for the rest of my life," he said. "Now, it's how can American business compete effectively, if one third of the people aren't educated well enough to get into the work force?"

After school, Bassill served in the U.S. Army for three years, during the Vietnam War. He also was in Army intelligence during his military career, spending a year each in Baltimore, Washington and Korea.

Bassill then came home, working a while at the Woolco store in DeKalb. In 1972, he left for Chicago to work for Montgomery Ward as an advertising copywriter.

While working for Montgomery Ward, Bassill was recruited to volunteer for a company-run tutoring program for the kids of Cabrini Green. By the end of his first year in the program, Bassill was serving

See PROGRAM, page 12 →



Former Sycamore resident Dan Bassill, the founder of Cabrini Connections, stands by the window of the office where the kids in the program gather to study for school. Behind him is the Cabrini Green housing project in Chicago's Loop. Chronicle Photo/DAVE MANN

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← PROGRAM, from page 1 on its governing committee. By the end of his second year, he was leading the program.

"In 1990, when a new executive came in and decided he wanted his advertising department not to have Dan Bassill, the company gave me some choices of giving me other jobs in the company that would not have meant a loss of pay," Bassill said.

Instead, he decided to leave the company's payroll and try to turn his tutoring program into a non-profit organization.

"Sometimes when the doors close, the doors open," he said. "Every now and then you need a nudge to move you into a different direction, and sometimes those different directions prove fascinating."

Bassill's new direction was not always straight and narrow; there were some lean years in the beginning. During those early years, Bassill paid the bills with the small amount of money his mother left him after her death and the memorial fund established by a local church.

"I didn't get paid back then," Bassill said. "Even now, when our cash flow is down, I borrow from myself to give us some money."

That memorial fund was established by St. Peter's Episcopal Church in Sycamore, which continues to support Bassill's program. The church recently created a foundation, which raises money for Cabrini Connections, in his mother's name, Margaret, who was an active member of St. Peter's.

On March 4, Bassill went to the church to accept a \$5,000 check for his efforts in Chicago. The money was raised by the proceeds of a yard sale, a food booth at Pumpkin Fest in Sycamore and private contributions, which the church matched.

"We set up the program to help honor her on Dan's behalf," said Fr. Matthew Dutton-Gillett. "Some parishioners, who knew him well, were aware of his program and thought it worthwhile. Given the connection Dan has with Sycamore, we were very enthusiastic to help."

Bassill said he enjoyed coming back to Sycamore earlier this month.

"When I left St. Peter's, I put my arm around Fr. Matthew and said, 'We're both missionaries. You're trying to save people's souls, and I'm trying to save people's lives,'" he said. "We both have to get converts, enthusiastic converts, for the rest of our lives. And we're both succeeding."

These kinds of long-distance connections and communication are exactly what is needed to improve the lives of children, Bassill said.

"I think what great opportunity there is for Sycamore to reach into the city and make some real friendships and vice versa," he said. "I know there is a reason to be connected, but the conversation of connection has a long way to go."

"When I come out to Sycamore and talk about this, I get a 'them' argument. I hear 'why don't they do this?' People can't understand why they aren't responding when you hold up an opportunity. What they don't realize is when you're born in Sycamore, you're born into a range of role models: mom, dad, brother, sister, neighbor all going to work in a variety of job opportunities."

Bassill said kids in many impoverished neighborhoods do not have anyone to show them how a responsible adult acts.

"In places like Sycamore, even if your family doesn't support you as well as the next family, you're pulled along by the momentum of all the families and all the activities," he said.

"In a poverty neighborhood, you're born into three generations of kids having kids. There aren't a variety of role models, where mom and dad are going to work everyday. And, in some of those, they're going to work selling drugs."

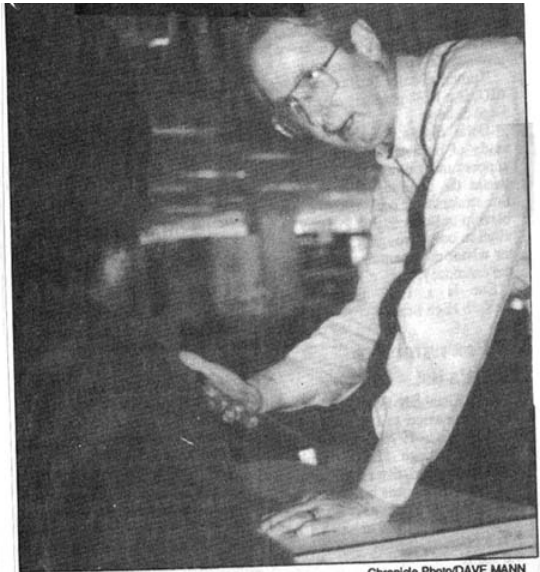
While in Sycamore, Bassill said he heard a lot of talk about how much the city has grown. People told him they were concerned about a large amount of residential growth without new business coming with it. Bassill sees this as part of a destructive trend.

"People are moving from the city to the suburbs to find more opportunities but also to escape some of the negatives," he said. "People can't keep moving their businesses farther west and think they're escaping this problem."

Large numbers of new people in a community put a strain on the school district and other city services, driving taxes up, Bassill said.

"As people move to the bedroom communities to escape the negatives or to find a pool of educated people to employ, they're adding to the problem and hurting the whole economy," he said. "They're eroding the tax base of the communities they're leaving and adding costs to the communities they're going to."

"The communities are being abandoned to those who have the



Dan Bassill advises one of the children in the Cabrini Connections tutoring program. Kids in the program are given help with their schoolwork, as well as any other problems in everyday inner-city life. Chronicle Photo/DAVE MANN

least ability to pay for their continuing education and services. And, ultimately, they're going to leave their new community and go farther out, leaving them to foot the bills."

Bassill said this attitude is partly because of people not accepting responsibility for their communities and the people in them.

"We need more people saying, 'The buck stops with me,'" he said. "There are neighborhoods of poverty, where the schools, community and the family are under-performing. People say blame it on the schools, but I blame it on the community. The school only serves the

five days a week, nine months a year."

Bassill will continue to apply his business knowledge and experience toward social change. While recognizing the many hurdles he faces, he said he is very optimistic about the future and will continue to simply bring people together.

"Racism exists in ignorance," he said. "If it wasn't black and white, it would be something else. The only way to overcome that is getting people to rub elbows long enough and often enough, so they can get to know each other as people and