

Safe haven



Vermont carrier takes in four at-risk teens

Plenty of people lament the fate of urban youngsters who struggle to overcome poverty and violence. Rutland, VT Branch 495 letter carrier Camilla “Cam” Gilligan became part of the solution.

Gilligan, a letter carrier since 1993, opened her Rutland home to four teens from one of the roughest neighborhoods in New York City, giving them access to a better education and a pathway to college.

The four African-American boys, along with a fifth living elsewhere in Rutland, came to the Vermont town with the help of a basketball coach, Mugsy Leggett, who works to place young students from New York City’s most risky neighborhoods in better circumstances. The boys have transformed the basketball team at Mount St. Joseph Academy, a tiny Catholic high school near the center of the quiet town of 16,000.

All five grew up in the Bronx in or near Edenwald, the largest public housing project in New York City. The area is plagued by crime and violence, and the

local schools offer little hope for advancing to bigger and better things, such as a good college. Despite the environment, their parents have raised fine children, Gilligan said.

“They’re really good kids. They’re very respectful. They do their own laundry. I haven’t had any trouble at all,” Gilligan said. “They’ve done a wonderful job of acclimating.”

Gilligan’s youngest son played on the team and she volunteered as a scorekeeper. Later she became parent representative to the school board, and that led to hosting four of the five young athletes from New York: John Dewey, Shannon Murray, Jahnathan Mitchell and Jaskin Melendez.

Gilligan is used to teenagers—her own three children are now in their 20s—but she said this round of kids is even more energetic than hers were.

“I can’t believe how much they eat,” she said.

For Gilligan, hosting the boys has nothing to do with basketball and everything to do with giving others a path to a better life the way her family always has.

“During the Depression, my grandmother always set an extra place at the table in case someone came to the door,” she said. Gilligan remembers her parents (her father was a rural letter carrier) taking in a lost trucker, a stranger who spoke little English, for the night at their home.

She noted that three of the four boys she hosts have been victims of violent crimes, and two had siblings who were murdered. “It literally saves lives to get them out of there,” she said.

When they arrived in Rutland, the boys confronted different challenges, like living in a small town near the foothills of the Green Mountains after growing up in a big city.

“Where we live, there aren’t any streetlights,” Gilligan said. “There are coyotes



CELEBRATING FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES
The Mount St. Joseph Academy team in Rutland, Vt., has five players from New York. Some in the town oppose the change.

In Vermont, Bronx Players Help Team, but Stir Outcry

By **ABBY GOODNOUGH** and **JESS RIDGWOOD**

RUTLAND, Vt. — The basketball team at Mount St. Joseph Academy, a small Catholic high school here, was flailing through its 2009-10 season when its coach got a call from a stranger in New York.

“I didn’t care where they were from.”

And so four boys from the Bronx arrived in September 2010 and a fifth a few months later, moving in with host families in this faded city of 10,500 and enrolling at a school that, with only 95 students, was barely afloat.

Quickly, the basketball team was transformed, notching a record of 16-7 for the 2010-11 season, a stunning turnaround from the previous year’s 2-18. This season, the Mounties, as the team is known, are 15-1 and sailing toward the state playoffs.

But the story of the Bronx boys in Rutland is not a uniformly happy one. Some students and parents are livid about their presence on the team, saying it deprives local players of court time

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Continued on Page A20

Vermont Team Scores With Influx From Bronx, But Sets Off an Outcry

From Page B1

They who played on the team and to serve as Georgetown. The school board has not yet voted on the city’s bid.

“We have good people that will come to the side of those young men and recognize their record of great citizenship,” he said. “Or will those that bark about ‘local kids’ and ‘imports’ be the only ones heard in this city?”

The team members say they started as strangers and ended up being “Shannon” and “Jaskin” and “Murray” and “Mitchell.”

“I got back at them playing on the court and working on the court,” said Mr. Leggett. “We’ve been playing on the court since we got here.”

Mr. Leggett, who said he had been playing on the court since he got here, said, “I didn’t care where they were from.”

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Shannon Murray, second from right, is one of five athletes from the Bronx on the Mount St. Joseph Academy basketball team. His success has brought new focus to games here that have been dormant for years. More photographs at nytimes.com/national.



“They’ve been in the state,” she said. “It’s not like they properly came up here to take their away.”

they can hear at night.” Being away from their families is hard too, she added, though parents and siblings visit often.

They also face being African-American in a small town with few minorities.

“The community is very white. They know they are stared at,” Gilligan said.

Their story has attracted media attention, including a writeup in *The New York Times*. The success of the Mounties, as the Mount St. Joseph basketball team is known, has also bred some resentment in town. Supporters of other high school teams have complained about “outsiders” giving the team an unfair advantage, with a few hateful comments aimed at both Gilligan and the boys.

Teammates and others have defended the school, pointing to the benefits for both the Bronx teens and the town of Rutland.

Tyler Sanborn, a former Mount St. Joseph player whose brother Matt is on the team, took on the critics in a letter to the *Rutland Herald*.

“Are there good people that will come to the side of these young men and recognize their record of good citizenship?” he wrote. “Or will those that bark about ‘local kids’ and ‘imports’ be the only ones heard in this city?”

School administrators point out that Mount St. Joseph also has students from China, Germany, South Korea and Spain—a diversity that benefits both these students and the rest of the student body at this small school. Most of their annual \$5,000 tuition has been paid by donations from alumni and others.

“Basketball is a means to an end for these kids,” Gilligan said. “They want

to go to college, and it didn’t matter how smart they were in the Bronx because of the schools there.” Three of the boys already have been accepted to four-year colleges.

“If these four kids were mine, I would want someone to help them too,” she said. “I’d do it again in a second.”

The students quickly transformed the Mounties. Two seasons ago, the team ended with a 2-18 win-loss record. This season, they climbed all the way to the top. The Mounties won the state championship in their division last month, beating the state’s top-ranked high school, 56-48, to cap a season with 22 wins and only two losses. Outscored early, 11-3, the Mounties finally caught up in the fourth quarter. Shannon Murray, one of the team members from the Bronx, led the team with 11 points and nine rebounds.

Though the boys are still adjusting to small-town life—Murray told Gilligan the strangest aspect of life in Rutland is “the smell of cow doo-doo, especially when it’s hot outside”—the boys who are headed to college this fall have already promised to visit her on weekends along with their own families.

“That made me feel good,” she said, “like I did something right, if they want to come back.” ☒

Opposite page: The four boys staying with Branch 495 member Cam Gilligan (c) are (from l) John Dewey, Shannon Murray, Jahnathan Mitchell and Jaskin Melendez.

Above: The five teens’ story appeared in *The New York Times*.

Mount St. Joseph’s basketball team won the state championship.

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