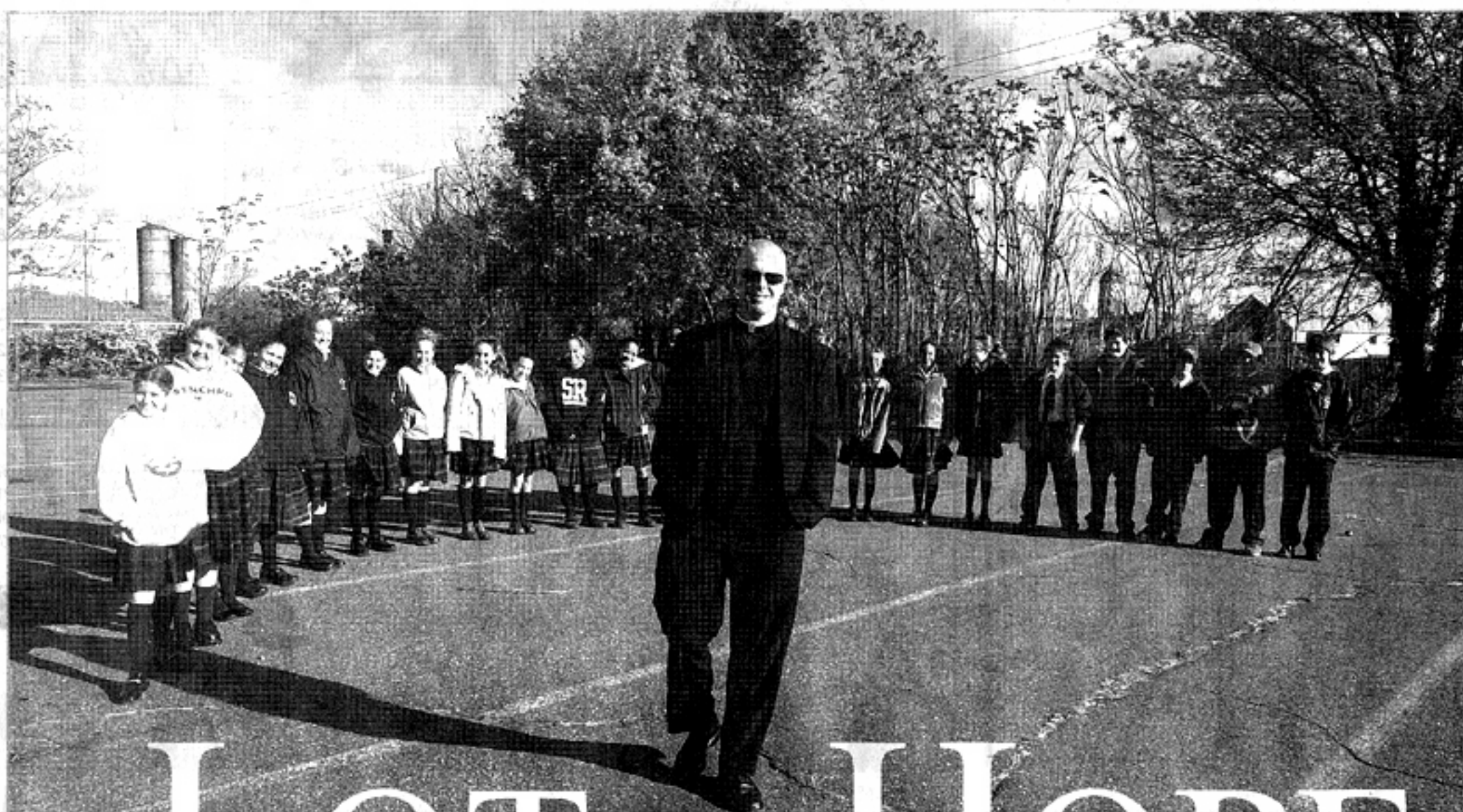


THE SUN, LOWELL, MASSACHUSETTS



a LOT of HOPE

Students at the St. Patrick's Elementary School's St. Vincent de Paul group in Lawrence, who assist in providing food for the food pantry, surround Rev. Paul O'Brien on the site of a future food pantry.

SUN/MICHAEL PIGEON

Today a vacant lot; tomorrow a place where children can eat

By DEBBIE HOVANASIAN
Sun Correspondent

LAURENCE — Today, a vacant lot sits by a red brick church.

Some day soon, it becomes the answer to a prayer.

As many as 800 volunteers anxiously await a groundbreaking there. A pastor shepherds his large congregation, while working countless hours with volunteers from within and outside his parish to raise funds for a meal center on that lot.

But as each day passes, children in Lawrence go hungry.

Lawrence is one of the poorest cities in the country. Lacking the economic revitalization programs that Lowell has experienced, 21 percent of its population lives below the poverty line, including 32 percent of the children. An expensive housing market leaves many Lawrence families no choice but to pay for shelter, leaving little for food. And with local meal and distribution centers unable to supply enough food for them, many of those families subsist for weeks on nothing but a bag of rice.

The Rev. Paul O'Brien, pastor of St. Patrick's Church in Lawrence, is out to change all that.

O'Brien and his team of volunteers are raising funds to build the Cor Unum Meal Center, with a goal of feeding 250 people, three times a day, seven days a week and 365 days a year.

A passion for ministering to the needy is nothing new for the 39-year-old pastor. While growing up in Chestnut Hill, and as a student at Harvard University, community service was part of his life. But it wasn't until he was studying for the priesthood in Rome, and Mother Teresa invited him to join her in working with the poor in Calcutta, India, that an experience came which altered his life.

O'Brien helped minister to the hundreds dying of disease in Calcutta, and later helped to dispose of their bodies. One day, he saw a beautiful five-year-old girl playing in a dump. To his horror, she had contaminated medical tubing — recently removed from a man who had died of hepatitis — in her mouth. Knowing she would die within weeks of that exposure, it became immediately clear to O'Brien: he would do whatever he could to prevent such tragic hunger in the future.

"Until then, I never truly realized what being a Christian was all about," he said. "That moment was God's gift."

Ironically, O'Brien's first

assignment after his 1991 ordination was St. Bernard's Parish in affluent Concord. Though there was no great need to minister to the poor, O'Brien did establish bonds with several community service-oriented teens, now in their 20's and 30's, who form the basis of "Labels Are For Jars," one of the programs aimed at funding Cor Unum (Latin for "one heart").

Labels Are For Jars is a concept O'Brien created to undermine negative societal labeling — addict, troubled teen, minority, mentally ill, prisoner. Such labels are often used to place blame for poverty and hunger. Yet, O'Brien points out, children in our own communities continue to suffer every day from hunger.

"Hunger is an extremely deep suffering," explains O'Brien. "It puts people on the edge of life and opens them up to doing things they would not normally do," often just to feed their children.

The Labels Are For Jars program aims to end this hunger through the sale of T-shirts and money collected in jars (in which the T-shirts are packaged). "Street Teams," comprised mainly of high school and college students, sell the shirts and collect donations at community events. The shirts, with a societal label on the front and the labels logo on the back,

are also sold through the web site.

"One hundred percent of the profits from Labels Are for Jars will benefit the hungry in Lawrence," stresses O'Brien. The young people driving this program "have a unique power to affect change in our society."

O'Brien, who admits to being "anxious" to get the center built, encourages local high schools and colleges to undertake Labels Are For Jars as a community service project. Many communities in Massachusetts, as well as out-of-state, have joined in, but more are needed to achieve the goal of raising \$1.5 million.

Also welcome is any organization — church groups, schools, community service organizations, civic groups, foundations — willing to sponsor an event (spaghetti suppers, bake sales, music benefits, etc.) to benefit Cor Unum. And monetary donations of any amount are welcome.

"It's a fantastic opportunity for other communities — especially wealthy neighboring communities — to make an immeasurable person-to-person connection to those who are hungry," said O'Brien. "The need is profound and immediate."

For more information, or to contact the Labels Are For Jars team, visit www.labelsareforjars.com.