



First Lady at Bronx High School

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September 13, 2002

Sep First lady Laura Bush visited an all-girl parochial high school in the Bronx to deliver a message of public service - and received a standing ovation from students who had doubted that someone of her prominence would ever set foot in their neighborhood.

"They let the first lady come - it makes us feel good," said sophomore Mukades Alioska, 14. "It's surprising. When people think about the Bronx, it's like - gangsters."

Bush spoke for 15 minutes in the auditorium of Aquinas High School on 182nd Street, and then huddled with 20 teens in the school's tidy library, where she asked them to channel fear over the 2001 terrorist attacks into helping those in need.

"During times that try our souls, we need to be surrounded by the faith and the love of others," Bush said to the crowd, most of them seniors.

To graduate, students at the well-regarded high school must complete 40 hours of public service. And when a firefighter from a nearby station, Joseph Spor, died at the World Trade Center last year, students gave their condolences, visiting the firehouse.

"This crowd that I am looking at is giving me hope," Bush said, as the teens let out a collective, flattered coo.

The visit came after an alumna, Maureen Gibson of Manhattan, went to a college friend, Noelia Rodriguez, who now is Bush's press secretary. Gibson reminded Rodriguez of a letter an Aquinas student had sent to the White House after the attacks.

That student, Charlene Cruz, now a freshman political science major at Rutgers University, said she never expected her dream to come true.

"I didn't think she'd actually come," said Cruz, who was at the school yesterday.

Twice the girls rose from their folding chairs, where they sat with their hands folded in their laps, to give the first lady a standing ovation. They also serenaded her with their school anthem and presented her with a sweatshirt, while outside the jingle from a Mister Softee truck could be heard through the open windows.

Bush even laughed along with the crowd when she was introduced as "Barbara Bush" - her mother-in-law.

Students said they were particularly moved when Bush mentioned where she was when John F. Kennedy was assassinated - in high school in Midland, Texas - and told the students they too would never forget where they were on Sept. 11, 2001.

"I felt I could relate to her on a personal level," said Melanie Rios, 17, an aspiring psychologist from Co-Op City.

"She was a senior, just like us."

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