'Retired' teacher with a van just keeps educating kids

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Star Tribune

Sunday, July 15, 2001

The paperwork says Allan Law retired two years ago as a Minneapolis teacher. Don't believe it. Every weeknight and every weekend, he's with kids, teaching them about history, geography, reading, politics and life.

Now he teaches outside the classroom, taking kids from inner-city neighborhoods in a red van with "Love One Another" emblazoned on the sides, picking them up for recreational trips to a roller rink, his parents' lake place, McDonald's, Underwater Adventures at the Mall of America or to his storage lockers full of toys, notebooks and clothes.

The 15-passenger van seems to be fueled by nonstop chatter -- kids' cries for attention ("Mr. Law! Mr. Law!"), his rolling lessons in knowledge ("to me, everything is academics") and his frequently ringing cell phone.

Law has a wisecrack for every kid.

On the phone, every call seems to end with "Do you need food tonight?" -- except, last week, for one: A mother calls from jail, and Law hands the phone to her 7-year-old daughter.

"Tell her I'll say a prayer for you tonight," he tells the girl.

Law started his street work 34 years ago, putting in 65 hours a week, after he found a dearth of night and weekend programs for kids.

Since he retired two years ago, he calculates, he's worked nearly 18 hours a day, seven days a week as an unpaid social worker, street minister, mobile food shelf and educator who makes house calls.

Dennis Massie, owner of Black Van Transportation, said Law gave him a vision to succeed three decades ago when he joined the program as a 9-year-old.

"The biggest thing about Mr. Law is, he's committed to children, committed to helping inner-city kids, giving them insight to a direction they would never, ever see if they were not in his program," Massie said.

Kids come from neighborhoods of shootings, drugs and poverty, of absent fathers and sometimes dysfunctional mothers.

Nearly all are children of color. Some live in homeless shelters. Some are children, nieces or nephews of youngsters who were in his program years ago.

Some, such as Gabrielle Mosley, 13, are former students.

Law's class at Andersen Elementary School "was funner than all my other classes I ever had in my life," Gabrielle said last week. At the same time, "he made us work."

Law remains the strict schoolmaster who won't tolerate misbehaving. "I've never tried to be cool," he said. "I've never given a high-five."

But he welcomes little kids hanging all over him. "I love the kids, and the kids know it," he said. "I have high expectations, and I don't want any excuses."

A born-again Christian, he sees his mission as "trying to teach not just academics but moral values."

His advice: "Nobody's better than anybody else. ... If you work hard, you're honest, you get along with people, you'll have a good life. ... You don't have to be a drug dealer or a highly paid athlete. ... A job you don't like is better than no job."

He said at least 350 kids are in his program at any given time, but the records are all in his head -- names, ages, needs, family situations. And he tries to respond to needs of the kids' families, too -- bringing food, persuading families to give temporary shelter to others, finding furniture, helping people move.

Law has won national awards. Last month, he put on the second suit he ever bought, got a friend to tie his necktie and took about 40 kids to a national volunteerism convention in Minneapolis, where he received a Points of Light award in a ceremony that included Neil Bush, the president's brother.

But the awards haven't brought in the $150,000 a year that Law said he needs to keep doing his work well -- or to expand by buying a bus that could carry more kids.

He said he probably put $450,000 of his teaching salary into his volunteerism in 29 years, then formed the nonprofit Minneapolis Recreation Development Inc. He said that contributions are down sharply this year, that he draws no salary and has donated much of his pension.

He hasn't gotten much corporate or foundation support. "A lot of agencies, we don't fit into their guidelines, the big building and the fancy names," he said.

He seems to fill a niche, nevertheless.

When a team from Minneapolis Promise for Youth surveyed hundreds of youngsters at city parks and community centers, they found that many kids didn't know what programs are available and many thought there wasn't enough for those ages 13 or 14 and up.

'Read everything'

On this night, Law has 31 kids, ages 4 to 17, packed into his van for a trip to Underwater Adventures.

"Go nice and slow. Read everything you see," Law admonishes as they trek through the glass underwater tunnel, surrounded by swimming sharks and other fish.

"They'd eat your hand in a second," he says at a piranha exhibit, then turns to 15-year-old John Walker and adds: "John, give me your hand."

Law's plan: Take the kids to do some academic research on fish, then bring them back for a second visit.

Later, at the McDonald's on Lake Street, he buys meals for the children ("for a lot of these kids, McDonald's is a treat") and writes checks for $151 after a 25 percent discount. He reassures a little girl that spilled pop isn't a tragedy. He gives $5 for food to a woman he's never met before.

Then he takes the kids riding in his van into the steamy night. They pass the University of Minnesota ("this is where you might go to school") and the suburban office tower where Kevin Garnett of the Timberwolves has an office.

As they pass grain elevators, he quizzes, "What's in those towers? ... What kind of grain?"

"Wheat!" "Oats!" come the answers. "Barlum!"

"Bar-lee" he corrects.

A child twirls a finger through Law's long hair. He jokes that he's not as old as his 56 years because "I was born at a very young age."

He lets the kids listen to rap on the radio, but then quickly switches it off because "I just heard a word I don't like to hear."

Taking the kids home to north and south Minneapolis is a two-hour marathon. Mothers, grandmothers, older siblings come out to greet Mr. Law, tell him how they're doing, exchange banter.

"Someday you'll appreciate Grandma more than anybody," he tells a teenage girl who is at odds with her caretaker grandmother.

"Get your act together 'cuz I love you," he tells another. One of Law's passengers lives where the kitchen ceiling has fallen. For several others, the mother isn't home, so Law leaves them at a grandmother's house where four families are living. For a girl who bought magazines at one pop stop, his parting words are, "Sherita, I want those things read now, you hear?"

The night is not done

When the last child is safely home after midnight, Law turns to feeding and counseling families.

He tries to get to bed by 4 a.m., he said, but this is the night he doesn't sleep because he can get leftover bread from a Byerly's bakery and take it to the needy.

He doesn't eat all that well himself -- once at about 2a.m. and after he rises in the morning, he said. He suffers from acid reflux, arthritis and a touch of glaucoma.

Law stands 5-feet-11, weighs about 210 and, almost nonstop, he can spin out 30 years of stories about rescuing prostitutes, confronting greedy boyfriends ("You need some money? Go get a job"), trying to safeguard young girls ("If anyone touches you, tell your mom, tell your grandma. ... Tell me, I'll go do something about it").

He may get as many as 250 phone calls a day, he said. The 7-year-old, alone in an apartment, called Law at 9:30 p.m., not knowing her mother had been jailed. "I'm a little scared," she told him. "My mom hasn't come back yet." He took her to a grandmother.

Law said only a handful of his charges have ended up in jail or pregnant, but many have become success stories.

"He's open like, basically, 24 hours," said Massie, who serves on the board of Law's nonprofit.

But that has taken a toll on Law's personal life. Law was married for a time in the 1960s and engaged in the '70s, he said.

But kids always seemed to come first.

"They are totally his life," said Mary Wendler, who taught with Law at Andersen school. "They'll call him at the most uncomfortable moment, and he'll go."

Wendler said she also saw the commitment in his unconventional, messy classroom, where his students got some of the school's highest test scores and he once moved low-achieving kids to improve by two grade levels in a six-week summer school she ran.

Law "is a master of relationships with young kids. ... He took an interest in them when no one else's doors were open to them," she said. "He teaches them what's possible in this world."

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