

Principal's at Home in School

By Gary Wisby
Staff Writer

When burglars were stealing typewriters from Providence-St. Mel School on the West Side, Principal Paul J. Adams fired the security guard and moved in.

"You can't run a school if they're going to steal everything out of the building," he said Tuesday.

Adams took over a nun's apartment in the former convent at the school, 119 S. Central Park, closed by the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Chicago in 1978 but reopened as a private school. "I'm the only nun in the building," he joked.

Having the principal in school 24 hours a day solved its security problems. "They know somebody's here," said Adams, 52.

That kind of dedication is one reason he has been named a 1993 Reader's Digest American Hero in Education. The awards honor 15 U.S. educators chosen from a field of 650 nominees.

Karen G. Carlson, principal of Prescott Elementary School, 1632 W. Wrightwood, also won an award. Each winner receives \$5,000, and the school gets \$10,000.

Adams, principal for 20 years, said the school's money will go into Providence-St. Mel's operating fund. He hasn't decided what to do with his money.

"Like I told my kids, I'm not going to Disneyland," he said.

Since the former high school went private, it has expanded to serve grades five through 12. Next fall it will include kids from first grade on.

"I'm always complaining that students lack the preparation I expect, so I decided to grow my own," Adams said. School enrollment is 500; it is 100 percent African American.

Under his leadership, Providence-St. Mel has:

- Seen every graduating senior for



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Paul J. Adams, principal of Providence-St. Mel School, doesn't just work at the school—he lives there.

15 years accepted by at least one college. Students test at or near the national average, and absenteeism is below 5 percent.

- Developed a summer program that has sent 300 students to U.S. and foreign campuses, camps and prep schools since 1990. When raising funds for the session, which has a side benefit of keeping kids off Chicago's streets during the hot months, "I tell people you can save a life by supporting this program," Adams said.

- Awarded \$40,000 in cash to students who earned B's or better. "The biggest jocks in this school are academic jocks," Adams says.

At Prescott, Carlson is notorious for breaking bureaucratic rules. One December evening, she and the local school council worked beyond their

permitted hours, and she defied a head custodian who threatened to have them evicted for trespassing.

Another time, representing 50 principals and financed by a reform group, she lobbied successfully in Springfield for a law permitting the addition of teacher planning and training time to the school day.

She also established tutoring and mentoring programs with nearby social service agencies and led efforts to raise \$13,000 to buy books.

Carlson, 40, credits her staff with helping to change Prescott, which she said was demoralized and roach-infested when she took over in 1990.

"They're willing to take risks, to try things that haven't been proven yet," she said. "We are challenging ourselves, and that's what makes the difference."