Dear friends of Catholic education:

As we enter into the second half of another school year, it is only fitting that we take time to reflect on our accomplishments. We hope you will start that journey by reading through the pages of Pillars magazine, an exciting publication highlighting some of the great things happening in and around our schools. Certainly, there are many more stories to tell, but this is a sampling of our achievements and our commitment to faith and excellence found in each of our 22 schools.

Our schools are busy places, and it takes so many dedicated administrators, faculty, parents, volunteers and other supporters to ensure that they thrive. This year, we are particularly proud of the advancements we’ve made in continuing to meet and improve upon the standards set forth by our system-wide Middle States Accreditation. After careful consideration, we’ve elected to focus on seven of the 12 standards that we believe will make the greatest impact in continuing to provide a robust educational experience. Our proactive approach to New York State ELA and mathematics examinations is just one example, as we work together on common assessments to help hone student instruction and focus achievement throughout the entire school year — not just at testing time. Small classroom sizes and low student/teacher ratios allow us to do this more effectively, as do the talents and dedication of our faculty.

We are also pleased with the progress of the decentralization of our four high schools — a process that has been in the works at various levels for the past several years. Each is at a different point in the process, but all have committed to the development of new ways of operating as stronger, independent entities — making their own decisions on enrollment, development, finances, and embracing academic programming based on information unique to each school’s specific needs, resources, strengths and weaknesses. The concept of decentralization is one I firmly believe will continue to build stronger school communities for the sustained success of our Catholic school system.

While our high schools have decentralized and many of our elementary schools are becoming more autonomous, we remain, of course, a unified ministry of the Diocese of Syracuse. To this end, we are making a greater effort to work with other mission resources and departments within the diocese in the practice of stewardship and for a greater sense of faith and fellowship.

Our enrollment remains stable, and our schools remain vibrant. Certainly, we’d like to see continued growth, and we are making strides to do so — not an easy task in a challenging Central New York economy. We ask you to continue to support our Catholic schools through your financial support, volunteerism, partnerships and, of course, prayer. We thank you for being a part of our Catholic school family.

Yours in Christ,

William Crist
Superintendent of Schools
Dear Friends,

Pope Francis often speaks of the importance of education, and still remembers his first grade teacher. “She was why I loved school,” he said. During his visit to the U.S. one year ago, the Holy Father visited a Catholic elementary school in Harlem, New York, telling those gathered that “When we all come together to educate our children, we will be one step closer to creating a world of good.” I would be remiss if I did not bring attention to the incredible commitment to extending mercy that I have witnessed in our schools. In addition to the hundreds of hours of service logged by our students, each of our 22 schools has again committed to a diocesan-wide Day of Service during the annual Catholic Schools Week celebration. This is just another example of how Catholic education not only benefits our students, but the greater community, as they “create a world of good.”

Some of the most enjoyable times as your Bishop are when I am invited to spend time in our schools. Our faith-centered school communities continue to promote academic excellence, strong moral conscience, and a deep devotion to our Catholic faith.

Here in our diocese, the continued support and dedication of our pastors and school communities is deeply appreciated. Thank you for your ongoing support of Catholic education. Be assured of my continued prayers throughout the school year.

Cordially yours in Christ,

Most Rev. Robert J. Cunningham
Bishop of Syracuse
Bishop Grimes Spanish Students Put Faith in Action at City Schools

BY CHRISTY PERRY TUOHEY

Students studying Spanish at Bishop Grimes Jr./Sr. High School in East Syracuse do more than just talk the talk (hablar). They walk the walk (camino).

Their talk, of course, is in Spanish as they learn vocabulary, speaking and writing skills. Their walk involves planning service projects to benefit economically disadvantaged children here in Central New York and abroad, a direct connection to Catholic social teaching that stresses family, community and participation, particularly to the poor and vulnerable.

Foreign language department chair and teacher Sharon Bearer has been assigning project proposals to her junior and senior students for the past 10 years and using them for community and international outreach.

The Spanish service projects give Bishop Grimes students opportunities to practice both kindness and language skills. Locally, the classes have chosen to work with Syracuse City Schools Seymour Dual Language Academy and Delaware Academy.

“We try to visit their classes several times a year,” she explained. “In the fall, my Spanish IV students write and illustrate bilingual children’s books, which we take to the schools and read to the K-1 classes. In the spring, we put on children’s plays in Spanish, which we perform at both schools.”

Spanish V student Molly McInerney took her hand-made book to Seymour first graders with her junior Spanish class last year and loved the experience. “We all had so much fun with the kids and you could just see the difference you make with them,” she said.

Molly and her partner wrote and illustrated a book about ducks going to school, she said. They read the book to the class and then helped students decorate headbands and “beaks,” as they imagined being little ducks in school.

Students Learn Spanish from Relocated Teacher Via Technology

BY CHRISTY PERRY TUOHEY

How does a teacher move hundreds of miles away from her school yet continue to teach there? That would be a long commute by car or an expensive investment in airplane tickets at best. But Norwich, New York’s Holy Family School found a way to keep its well-liked Spanish teacher on its faculty and in the classroom even after she relocated to another state.

Erica Needham-Erriko taught at Holy Family for five years, until her husband landed a job in New Jersey in December 2015. The opportunity brought the couple closer to family. Still, it was a difficult choice. “I was very upset about it, because I loved teaching at Holy Family, and I loved what I was doing,” she said.

The school’s technology coordinator Ann French said the feeling was mutual. “She moved away, and we didn’t want to lose her, so we asked her if she would possibly do an online meeting with the kids,” French explained.

Holy Family principal Lydia Brenner worked with Needham-Erriko to figure out a way that she could continue to teach there using a virtual digital classroom program.

“She asked, ‘Would you be willing to do that working from home?’” Needham-Erriko remembered. “I said, ‘Well, let’s try it.’”

French’s sister, a college professor, told her about a program called Zoom that she had used to teach distance learning classes. Zoom is a video and web conferencing service that allows people in different locations to see and hear each other and interact in real time. Unlike the online video phone service Skype, Zoom allows users to share computer or tablet screens, documents, games and books.

After moving out of the area, Erica Needham-Erriko continues to teach Spanish to students at Holy Family School in Norwich and St. Margaret’s School using technology.
The first Spanish V student project for the 2016-17 school year was a book drive to benefit first graders at Seymour. The Bishop Grimes students raffled off a Halloween basket, stationed book drop-off points at the school and partnered with community businesses to collect enough books for every child in the school’s first-grade class. More than 700 children’s books were donated to the drive, and the raffle raised $500, which was used to purchase Spanish-language books for the Seymour students.

Seventy-nine percent of Seymour’s students come from economically disadvantaged homes, according to data gathered by the New York State Education Department. Eighty-five percent of the kindergarten through 12th grade students, about half of whom are Hispanic or Latino, are eligible for the state’s free school lunch program. Delaware Academy also has a majority of students whose families are living in poor economic conditions.

The children received two books each, one in English and one in Spanish, which the Bishop Grimes students delivered to the school in December.

Said Bearer, “The first grade teacher told us that many of these children have never owned a book, so we felt that this was a chance for us to make a difference.”

Christy Perry Tuohey is an author and freelance writer in Syracuse, New York.

Needham-Errico teaches four or five classes a day at Holy Family to kindergartners through sixth graders. She can see and talk to her students through her home computer, and they, in turn, see and hear her via a Smart Board — a large interactive whiteboard — in the school’s library. The students use iPads in the classroom and can also walk up and touch the Smart Board to play language games.

“It is basically like they’re watching TV, and I am on the screen,” Needham-Errico said. “They hear everything, just as if I were there in person. It works really, really well.”

French said that, despite the distance, Needham-Errico keeps the students’ attention. Although French stays in the library while Spanish classes are being taught, Needham-Errico is in control of the classes and keeps a watchful eye on behavior. “They know that I can see them and I can hear them, so they know if they’re misbehaving I’m going to call them out on it right away,” Needham-Errico said.

Upper grade-level Spanish students have textbooks on their iPads, and Needham-Errico has the same books on her computer. If she needs to show the students digital book pages, she can share her screen with the class. If she needs to write notes for them, they can see her typing those out, too. Using Google Classroom and Google Docs, the students can look up their assignments, click on them, complete and submit them during class. Needham-Errico can then grade those immediately and offer feedback through students’ own personal Google email accounts.

“She’s so good,” said French. “She keeps the kids engaged, and they’re active and they participate in the class, so it’s really a very neat thing to witness and see.”

In addition to her Holy Family classes, Needham-Errico also teaches virtual Spanish classes at St. Margaret’s School in Mattydale. The set-up there is similar to that of the Holy Family digital classroom. An aide is in the room while Needham-Errico teaches, but content and discipline are 100 percent up to her. She appears on the Smart Board in that classroom and can show book pages, write notes and receive assignments in real time.

“I was a little nervous when this first started because I wasn’t sure if the interaction would be the same since I wasn’t there,” Needham-Errico said. “But it’s really amazing to me how it has really become such a success and how it is very similar to me just being in the classroom. We still have interactions and relationships.”

Christy Perry Tuohey is an author and freelance writer in Syracuse, New York.
Catholic School Community Helps Ease Pressures of Military Life

BY CHRISTY PERRY TUOHEY

U.S. Army officer Carlos Cervantes arrived in Iraq in January 2005. When he deployed, Carlos left behind his 7-months-pregnant wife Kristine and his 2-year-old son Andrew.

The Cervantes, more than many families, appreciate how precious family time is. Eleven years later, now living in Cicero, they spend crisp fall days on football fields together. They now have three boys who all attend Syracuse-area Catholic schools. They, more than most, know that service to their country means some lonely stretches when family members are thousands of miles apart, and how critical a sense of community can be during those times.

A MILITARY MARRIAGE

They came from opposite ends of the country; Carlos from the tough streets of Los Angeles and Kristine from Connecticut. They met at Fort Lewis in Tacoma, Washington, and later served together in South Korea.

Carlos’ mother emigrated to the U.S. from Guatemala. Despite her struggle to work a factory job and feed her family, she found the funds to send him to a Catholic school. He went on to attend a local college until bad luck struck. His car was stolen, and, without a way to get to classes, he had to drop out.

“I wasn’t comfortable sitting at home, and so I’m looking at recruiters and months later, I’m in the Army,” he said, laughing. “That’s how it went!”

The military legacy in Kristine’s family is a long one, including her grandfather’s service in World Wars I and II and her father’s service as a Marine commander in Vietnam. Kristine and her sister both became Army officers. Like other couples who share career fields, the Cervantes knew well what their service required and the potential for separation when someone was deployed to a war zone.

Kristine retired from the Army in 2002, just after 9/11 and before the major deployments began to Iraq and Afghanistan. In 2005, they were living in North Carolina, where Carlos served at Fort Bragg. He missed their second son’s birth by just three months, after was deployed to Iraq.

“We felt good about where our kids were going,” Kristine explained. “They were happy there. You knew that they were in a good place and a safe place.”

Carlos added, “We love it. Probably one of the greatest contributors to our decision to stay here was how close we felt to the school and the community overall.”

After his 2005-06 Iraq tour of duty, Carlos’ next deployment came up quickly. In January 2007, he was deployed to Afghanistan. His commander allowed him to stay back in Central New York until their third son, Thomas, was born, but he shipped out 10 days after. Their oldest was 4, their middle son just about a year old.

That wartime service stint led to more years of family separation. After his return, Carlos attended military-funded graduate school in Rhode Island. During that year, he returned to Syracuse on weekends. But as soon as he graduated in June 2012, he was sent to Texas, from where he returned to Afghanistan as an Afghan Army advisor.

Although Kristine’s parents had moved to Central New York and lent their support, having their dad far away became harder for their sons.

“We felt good about where our kids were going.”

“Deployments are tough,” Carlos said. “The demands of that environment are challenging. But obviously the most difficult part of the deployment is always absence, the absence of the family.”

“WE FELT GOOD ABOUT WHERE OUR KIDS WERE GOING.”

In 2008, the family moved to New York. Carlos became commander of the military entrance processing station at Hancock Air Force Base. Before moving north, Kristine researched nearby schools for their oldest, Andrew, to attend. They enrolled him at St. Margaret’s School in Mattydale sight unseen from North Carolina. Their two younger sons, Evan and Thomas, are now sixth and fourth graders at St. Margaret’s. The school provided them with the sense of community they hoped to find, and it ultimately clinched their decision to settle long-term in the Syracuse area.

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“Our children are now here.”

“Although Kristine’s parents had moved to Central New York and lent their support, having their dad far away became harder for their sons. “The hardest deployment was his most recent one, even though we were here. Seeing him out there in the field, you know it is dangerous and you know you’re angry.”

Kristine said. “But you don’t want to see your family suffer.”

“They’re going to play in the Opening Day parade,” said Kristine. “They’re going to cheer us on.”

“We felt good about where our kids were going.”

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when the boys were getting older and I felt like they needed their father more,” said Kristine.

Andrew, now a ninth grader at Bishop Ludden Jr./Sr. High School, was only in 5th grade when he made a promise to his father. “I had to kind of be like the man of the house because that’s what he told me to do while he was gone. So I had to take on a lot more responsibility,” Andrew said.

LETTERS FROM HOME

When son Evan was in Denise Clark’s 2nd grade class at St. Margaret’s, the teacher decided to connect her students with Carlos while he trained Afghan soldiers. “She would have all of her kids write me letters, and she sent them to me in an envelope,” he said. “And I’d write one combined one and kind of answer all of their little questions. And I’d send them pictures of me while I was gone.”

Kristine added, “With that school, there’s kind of a sense of ‘everybody knows everybody and everybody watches out for everybody.’ And I thank Mrs. (Amanda) Hopkins (St. Margaret’s School principal) for instilling ways to do this.”

CIVILIAN LIFE

Carlos retired as a lieutenant colonel and is now the director of student services at State University of New York’s Educational Opportunity Center. Kristine is a physical therapist and also teaches occupational therapy students at Le Moyne College. Andrew is a running back on Bishop Ludden’s football team.

Their commitment to the community continues, as Carlos coaches on his younger sons’ Pop Warner football team staff and they volunteer at St. Margaret’s, carving out time in their busy lives whenever possible. They are happy to give back to the educational and spiritual community that has supported their family all these years.

Christy Perry Tuohey is an author and freelance writer in Syracuse, New York.
Diocesan Schools Build Relationships to Increase Enrollment

BY RENÉE K. GADOUA

Maria Smith spent Halloween at All Saints Catholic School’s parade and party. “This is a huge day for them,” Smith said. “They walk around the block and parents are lined up to take their pictures. You’d think it was Macy’s Thanksgiving Day parade. It’s a lot of fun.”

Smith’s children, Rocco and Francesca, are in 2nd and 1st grade at All Saint in Endicott. When the family moved from New Jersey to Endicott last year, Maria and Peter Smith immediately enrolled them in the Catholic school.

Smith soon learned the school’s enrollment was stagnant, and she wanted to do something about it. She read about the Parent Ambassador Program, developed by the Archdiocese of Chicago and effective in increasing enrollment. Numerous diocesan school systems have adopted the program, which stresses parent engagement in the recruitment and retention process. Smith suggested All Saints give it a try.

All Saints’ Parent Ambassador Program is one of several ways diocesan schools are reaching out to build enrollment and develop relationships with the community. The efforts take different forms, but share the goal of raising Catholic schools’ visibility, championing their educational benefits and sharing their values.

Six parents serve as parent ambassadors at All Saints. This year they are mentoring about 15 families new to the school. Some serve as tour guides, accompanying the family and the principal, Angela Tierno Sherwood. After a tour, the families meet privately with an ambassador.

“WE’re selling our schools, so it’s good for them to talk to someone who has bought into it and why they’ve bought into it,” Sherwood said.

The ambassadors also do outreach to the six parishes near All Saints. “Since our school is not affiliated directly with a parish, we feel it’s important for parishes to know what we’re doing,” Sherwood explained. A pastor appreciation breakfast in the fall aimed to build relationships, as well.

In August, Smith hosted a breakfast for new families. “It was great for the moms to get to know us,” she said. “Knowing our experience last year as new parents, it’s nice to have a friendly face, or four or five friendly faces, when they walked in on the first day.”

The ambassador program already has helped Sherwood. “These are people I know are on the same page as I am,” she said. “They are so totally invested in the school. It’s invaluable to me. It’s good for parents to be invested, so I can invest my time in education.”

Even with enthusiastic boosters, student retention is sometimes out of the school’s control. “One of biggest factors in this area is loss of families due to employment,” Sherwood said. “Over the last year, we had several families take jobs down south and they had multiple children. That is one of our biggest challenges.”
For now, the ambassadors don’t have a specific goal for increasing enrollment. “We want to get the program really solidified and put metrics to it later,” she said. “I hope it does what we want it to.”

A BIG FAMILY AT ST. ROSE

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t. Rose of Lima in North Syracuse isn’t facing an enrollment problem; with 278 students, the classrooms are full. But that hasn’t stopped the school from working to connect with the parish and the community.

“Our personality is we’re just a big family, and we want people to have that feeling when they walk in the door,” said Principal Mary Crysler.

The school extends that family philosophy in several ways. For example, St. Rose has invited staff from the local public school and from other Catholic schools to hold joint professional development programs.

To remind people that the school and church belong to the same family, parishioners are invited to concerts and other events. The school also invites prayer requests from parishioners. In one instance, a woman asked the school to pray for her ailing mother, and the students made cards for her. The woman died soon after receiving the cards, but her daughter told the students that her mother was touched by their concern.

“We want the kids to grow up and give back without expecting anything in return,” Crysler said. “We really want people to be part of who we are and know we’re not just looking for people to support us financially. We want them to understand there’s more to us.”

REACHING OUT TO OTHER FAITHS AT ST. MARY’S IN B’VILLE

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t. Mary’s Academy in Baldwinsville opened the school year with 103 students, its lowest enrollment ever. Since then, they’ve picked up a few students. But because the Baldwinsville public school added full-day Kindergarten a few years ago and because Upstate employment opportunities are unreliable, principal Renae Henderson expects enrollment challenges to continue.

The school’s marketing committee decided to reach out to other Christian churches in the area. The group sent 18 invitations, and about five pastors attended a luncheon.

“We always tell them it goes beyond Catholic teaching,” Henderson said. “We teach them morals and values, which are important to any religion. Being a good person and doing service and having manners are values you can’t teach from a textbook. It’s not just a Catholic thing. It’s being a good person and learning how to make the world a better place just by being in it.”

Henderson said the school is likely to reach out again to leaders of other churches. “It’s not one and done,” she said. “We want to build a relationship.”

She hopes the school can again enroll 140 students. “We’re doing everything we’re able to do within the constraints of our budget,” Henderson said. “We can do all the advertising we want, but the number one advertising for this business is word of mouth. That can make or break us.”

Renée K. Gadoua is a freelance writer and editor. Follow her on Twitter @ReneeKGadoua.
PLTW Launch Program Offers ND Elementary Students A Jump on STEM

BY DYANN NASHTON

O
otre Dame Schools have taken Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM) education to a new level. An offshoot of the popular high school pre-engineering Project Lead The Way, the PLTW Launch program is tailored for students in Kindergarten through 5th grade and made its debut at Notre Dame Elementary School last year.

Notre Dame Elementary pioneered the PLTW Launch in the Syracuse Diocese, and, according to the PLTW website, it is one of only three Catholic schools in New York State to offer the program. Notre Dame Elementary’s program is the only one of its kind between Saratoga and Baldwinsville. St. James School in Johnson City is starting Launch this year.

According to Notre Dame Elementary’s STEM Coordinator Barbara Wojcik, “Most schools start with PLTW in high school or perhaps the junior high program, PLTW Gateway,” she said. “Instead we started full forward Kindergarten through 6th grade rather than working back from the upper levels or starting in increments.”

Launch aligns to the New York State curriculum, Common Core, and Next Generation Science Standards in each grade level on an ongoing basis. As the school’s Launch lead teacher, Wojcik attended special trainings that then allow her to coach the grade-level classroom teachers in the activity, project and problem based teaching method. Following training, teachers become certified to teach PLTW Launch.

The program also requires an investment in tools such as Mini iPads and Vex robotic kits. Notre Dame Schools Development Director Kari Puleo said the program, as well as PLTW’s Gateway program at the junior high level, was made possible through a nearly $38,000 grant from Oneida County’s Partners in Prosperity Fund.

Wojcik, a 40-year teaching veteran, said Catholic schools have the agility to readily introduce innovative programs like this. “Our school has always been very proactive and stayed ahead of things ... The diocese allows us to adapt to rather than simply adopt new curriculum,” she said.

The program fosters critical thinking, collaboration and problem solving, according to Wojcik. “One of the tenets of Launch is the idea of ‘forward failure,’ which gives the children the freedom to go back when they get some place in a project that doesn’t work,” she explained. “Their curiosity eliminates the fear of failure.”

Wojcik said the program boosts knowledge retention. She described one of Principal Mary Rossi’s visits with first graders in April where the children were still excitedly talking about the stars, sun and moon and terminology they learned through Launch back in January.

PLTW Launch also appeals to different types of students who may not be comfortable with traditional book learning. “These students often become leaders in the class with the hands-on approach to the material,” Wojcik noted. “They work better in the mode.”

Dyann Nashton is a freelance writer from Oneida, New York.
Kindergarten and Pre-K students at Immaculate Conception School in Fayetteville are learning how to play the violin through an exciting new pilot program, the Suzuki method.

“I like being able to learn how to play the violin,” said kindergartner Brigid Hayden, as she waited for her music class to start. “It isn’t hard, and the teachers make it fun.”

The Suzuki method was developed by Japanese violinist Shinichi Suzuki when he taught Japanese children in the 1930s. He believed the emphasis should be on the development of the whole child in a nurturing environment, an education to bring out the human potential of the child.

The Suzuki pilot started at IC in the fall of 2016 with accomplished music teachers Alyssa Blount and Muriel Bodley at the helm. Both women have been trained in the Suzuki method. Blount received her training at the Ithaca College Suzuki Institute. Over the last 10 years she has taught at Syracuse University as well as in the Fayetteville Manlius and Liverpool school districts. In addition, she has taught at her home music studio.

Bodley, after retiring from the Fayetteville school district, initiated an orchestra program at an area Catholic high school. She serves on the performing arts faculty of Le Moyne College, and she also taught at Syracuse University. Bodley received her Suzuki training from Ithaca College, University of Wisconsin at Stevens Point, Manhattan School of Music and Syracuse University. She also served as co-owner and director of Suzuki School of Syracuse for 20 years.

Parental involvement is a very important principle of the Suzuki method, and the relationship between parent, teacher and student as they work together is key to bringing about the growth of not only a musician, but a beautiful human being. Sally Lisi, principal at Immaculate Conception, is pleased to offer the new program. “It’s such a positive program,” commented Blount. “We record the children’s lessons and email clips of them to the parents so they can watch them. Parental involvement is key and there’s positive peer reinforcement happening, too. The method instills focus and confidence.”

Claudia Mathis is a freelance writer in Syracuse, New York.
Grimes Valedictorian Takes a Chance on Yale

BY CAROLINE K. REFF

“I’LL JUST TRY. YOU NEVER KNOW WHAT WILL HAPPEN.”

That’s what Danielle Yerdon told herself when she applied to the prestigious and highly competitive Yale University. The 2016 valedictorian of Bishop Grimes Jr./Sr. High School originally thought she’d attend college nearby, possibly in Rochester, but she couldn’t stop thinking about the Ivy League. A top student, she wanted to study biology and also continue to pursue her life-long love of dance. Yale was a great fit, and, although she knew the school only accepted about 5 percent of its applicants, she decided it couldn’t hurt to apply.

“Waiting was nerve wracking,” she said, but when the decision letter finally arrived, she waited for her parents, Brian and Susan, to come home, so that they could open it together. “You never know” suddenly turned into “Welcome to Yale!”

Yerdon has never been one to back down from a challenge. In addition to her rigorous classes at Grimes, she was a member of the Student Council and Peer Ministry, played the flute in the band, and participated in many community service projects both in school and with the youth group at St. Daniel’s Parish in Lyncourt. Her greatest commitment, however, was dance, something she started at age 4. She continued to dance even when she was diagnosed with a severe case of scoliosis in middle school. Her condition meant that for two years she had to wear a back brace for 22 hours a day.

“I got to take the brace off for dance class for two hours a day,” she said. “Dancing helped me keep my sanity. It taught me perseverance. I can’t imagine not being able to dance every day.”

Now a thriving freshman at the New Haven, Connecticut, campus, Yerdon credits her parents, teachers and the individualized attention she received at Grimes for helping to push her toward her dreams. She intends to keep dancing at Yale and also study biology with a special interest in prosthetics and orthotics.

“It’s amazing what kind of technology is happening in these areas,” she said. “I’ve always loved science, and my dance experience has given me a greater understanding of movement, so it’s a great combination.”

“It’s incredible here,” she added. “I’ve met people from every corner of the globe, and I hope to make a difference.”

Once again, this determined young woman intends to try — because you never know what will happen.

All of the diocesan high school 2016 valedictorians are now pursuing their dreams as college freshman. Here’s what they had to say about how they got there:

BISHOP LUDDEN JR./SR. HIGH SCHOOL: GRIFFIN WALKER

Walker is now a freshman at Stony Brook University majoring in biomedical engineering. He hopes to eventually pursue cancer research.

“My Catholic education helped me prepare for college by teaching me hard work, understanding, cooperation and, most importantly, keeping true to my faith,” said Walker. “College is a time when many students are tested in their faith; however, I feel Bishop Ludden has provided me with a strong foundation in Christ that I can rely upon.”
NOTRE DAME JR./SR. HIGH SCHOOL:
JONATHON SCHMALZ

Schmalz now attends Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute where he is majoring in computer systems engineering. He plans to pursue a career as a computer/software engineer. “Catholic education has instilled in me many values that have become cornerstones to my character. Perhaps the most important is discipline” said Schmalz. “My time at Notre Dame and in the NJROTC has taught me selflessness, which is a priceless trait needed to be an effective leader. Thanks to Notre Dame and the Notre Dame NJROTC Unit, I now have the tools necessary to be successful and create a better future.

SETON CATHOLIC CENTRAL HIGH SCHOOL:
MAYA BAYKAL

Baykal is a biology major at Binghamton University with plans to one day be a pediatrician. “I had 13 years of wonderful Catholic education, and I am thankful that I not only learned and built long-lasting relationships with my teachers and classmates but also to have shared a spiritual journey with them,” she said. “The small class sizes gave me the opportunity to reach and attain my goals, as well as prepare myself for college and for the future. (Catholic school) really showed me how I can make a difference in the world and helped me develop into the person that I am today.”

Caroline K. Reff is a freelance writer in Syracuse, New York, and a special projects consultant for the Catholic Schools Office.

Bishop Grimes Offers Rare AP Computer Science Option

Bishop Grimes Jr./Sr. High School is one of only a very few schools nationwide to offer the new AP Computer Science Principles course, and the only Catholic high school in the Syracuse Diocese to do so, according to Patrick Kinne, assistant principal.

A year ago, Bishop Grimes administration and faculty were looking at ways to increase the rigor and real world applicability of its curriculum when it was mentioned by one of the members of the school’s Academic Affairs Committee, Le Moyne College Associate Professor David Voorhees, that there was a new advanced placement course in computer science. At the time, Grimes did not have a computer science or programming course but did have many students interested in that field of study.

Kinne approached Bradley Beth, program coordinator of a pilot program, Thriving in Our Digital World, through the University of Texas at Austin, and received an almost immediate response. Soon, Robert Doss, technology teacher at Bishop Grimes, attended a week-long summer training program sponsored by the National Science Foundation that not only allowed him to teach the course but also gave him full access to resources at the University of Texas and an online community of other teachers across the country piloting this course, as well. In addition, Voorhees, who the director of the computer science program at Le Moyne, agreed to work weekly with the students during lab periods.

Bishop Grimes has invested in a series of brand new computers and equipment that have allowed 11 students to take the course in the 2016-2017 academic year with many more eager to participate.

“Computer science is all around us. It’s become a basic and necessary skill,” said Kinne. “In order to prepare our students for the world that they face beyond Bishop Grimes, it is our responsibility to provide them with every opportunity they can have in order to be academically and professionally successful young men and women of faith.”
International Students Enhance School Culture, Boost Enrollment

BY CAROLINE K. REFF

It’s hard to believe that Jingkai Zhou is just 13 years old. Thousands of miles away from his home in Shanzi Province, China, this 7th grader, who likes to be called Barnett, has an unusual maturity as he navigates a new culture and educational experience at Bishop Ludden Junior/Senior High in Syracuse.

Barnett applied to 10 American schools last summer. He decided to attend Bishop Ludden when he saw it was well regarded academically and because he was eager to experience New York State. He admits he pictured more of a New York City atmosphere before he arrived, but he has quickly come to appreciate the suburban lifestyle of his host family George and Brenda Marshall, who live in nearby Fairmount.

Barnett is one of the youngest of several dozen students who attend the four Catholic junior/senior high schools in the Syracuse Catholic Diocese. The students come from various countries, including China, Vietnam, So. Korea, Egypt and Ghana, and are found through educational placement agencies.

The diocesan high schools have been eager to draw students from around the world in an effort to give their own students exposure to other cultures and boost enrollment. The international students are eager for the opportunity, as well, as they are exposed to a new culture and believe their educational experience in the U.S. will enhance their chances of admission to some of the most competitive American universities.

While Barnett admitted his parents and sister were “sad” to see him go so far away, he knows they are very proud of his intention to receive an American education. Already he has his eye on Harvard, Stanford and Berkley, where he hopes to study computer science or engineering.

“I plan to return to China after college,” said Barnett, who explained that an American education is considered “elite” in China and almost guarantees a good job and a bright future.

He is well on his way. The 7th grader currently takes 9th grade algebra, his favorite subject, although he acknowledges that English class continues to be his biggest challenge. Religion class was something completely new to him, as his family does not practice any faith. Still he looks at it as a kind of social experiment.

“I don’t know anything about the Bible, but one of the reasons I chose this school was because religion is such a part of the American culture, and I want to learn more about that,” he said.

One of the biggest adjustments for Barnett has been having free time in his schedule. In China, he went to school for eight hours a day, did homework for another three hours, and then, in preparation for coming to the U.S., studied English for another five hours. “As a 6th grader, I slept an average of five hours a day,” he said.

Barnett has filled that extra time in the U.S. with friends and activities. He said he knows almost everyone in Bishop Ludden’s 7th and 8th grades and is “pretty thankful they accept me.” He has immersed himself in robotics and chess clubs and was even elected class treasurer this year. His greatest love,
However, is basketball. “We watch a lot of NBA in China,” said Barnett, whose favorite team is the Golden State Warriors. I love basketball because of the teamwork. Does he play basketball too? Unfortunately, it doesn’t love me back!” he said with a laugh.

Bishop Ludden Principal Brenda Reichert keeps track of Barnett and all of the international students to make sure they are doing well and adjusting to the school environment. She enjoys having the international students as a part of the student body and hopes to bring in students from other countries in the future.

“Barnett’s presence here, along with our other international students, is great for the Ludden culture,” said Reichert. “He is the embodiment of who we are.”

TO GRADUATION AND BEYOND

Unlike Barnett, Fangyi Yang, who goes by Linda, has been in the U.S. for three years attending Notre Dame Junior/Senior High School in Utica. She is one of a number of students who attends the school and has become immersed in the daily life of an American teenager.

“I have always wanted to explore the world ever since I was little,” said Linda, who grew up in Beijing, China. “I started learning English at the age of 5. Watching English movies was a good way to improve my listening, and this also gave me a strong will to actually go to the countries where they were filmed. Coming to the United States was a difficult decision for me, since I had to leave my family, friends and the city where I grew up. However, I have had such a strong will to explore, and this has exceeded the other emotions. I am sure this decision was much more difficult for my mom and dad than for me.”

For the past two years, Linda has lived with the McCoy family, Ken, who is the CFO of Notre Dame Schools, his wife, Tammy, and their two daughters, age 12 and 14.

“Linda is just like a daughter and sister in our family,” said McCoy of the experience. “She is a quiet, sweet kid, and we treat her the same as we treat our own. She has fit right in with our family, and it’s a good experience for my children to see that she is still a kid just like they are even though she comes from another culture.”

“She is my daughter from Asia, and this is her American home,” McCoy added, noting that his family has helped her through times when she was homesick and missed her family back in China. “Still, it’s been a positive experience with no hiccups at all.”

Linda enjoys her classes at Notre Dame and is not bothered by the faith-based curriculum. “My family’s belief is Buddhist, so it is not difficult for me to attend a faith-based school. By the knowledge I gain in religion class, I find every religion has some similarities to each other. They are all good, and I respect all religions,” she said.

She will graduate in June from Notre Dame and is planning to attend an art college and major in graphic design, following in the footsteps of her father, who is a designer in China. The McCoy family has assured her she will always have a home-away-from-home during college breaks.

As Linda’s time at Notre Dame draws to a close, she is grateful for the experience. She said, “My time at Notre Dame has been a great experience in my life. It has taught me not only in academics but also to become a better person. I am grateful for being a part of Notre Dame!”

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— KEN McCoy
Once a week, Rev. John Manno teaches the 6th grade religion class at Holy Family School in Fairmount. The pastor also joins students for lunch and for recess occasionally.

“They’re so used to seeing the priests in a formal setting,” he said. “It just drives them crazy, in a good way, when they see us in the cafeteria or on the basketball court.”

The interactions are an intentional effort to improve the connection between the parish and the school. Fr. Manno and the principal, Sr. Christina Marie Luczynski, CSSF, began those efforts shortly after they both arrived at Holy Family in 2015.

About 20 percent of the school’s 274 Pre-K to 6th grade students are from families in the parish, a number they consider low for a parish of 3,500 families. At least 1,000 families in the parish have school-age children, according to the pastor.

“It seemed low, and we thought we could do better,” Fr. Manno said. He and Sr. Christina hope to increase the percentage of parish families with children in the school to 40 percent.

Gone are the days when everyone attended their neighborhood parish and sent their children to the parish school. The area’s strong public schools also cuts the potential student body, Fr. Manno added.

The school could accommodate about 100 more students, but the campaign to strengthen the parish-school bond is not just about increasing enrollment. The school is one of the parish’s ministries. Although the buildings are physically connected, the relationship has weakened over time, and he and Sr. Christina are working to rebuild it.

“The school is not separate,” he said. “We’re all obligated to get behind the school and give it support. We’re all called to transmit the faith. It’s part of our tradition to have Catholic education available to our kids.”

The parish has taken several actions to remind people of that. One weekend Mass a month, for example, features Holy Family students — dressed in their school uniforms — as greeters, ushers, altar servers and lectors.

“It lets people see our school kids,” Fr. Manno said. “It makes it real to our parish that the school is alive and well.”

Second graders, who are preparing for their First Communion, attend Thursday 9 a.m. Mass. “It’s a win-win,” Sr. Christina said. “They get to see the older members praying, and the older members love seeing the kids. We support each other with prayer and service projects.”

The parish dedicates one of the church’s display cases to the school, highlighting artwork or class projects. “There’s a constant visual reminder that the school is there,” Fr. Manno said.

Holy Family also works to make the school more visible through simple marketing techniques, including adding the school’s name, logo and phone number to the church bulletin, increasing signage to highlight the school, and listing both the church and the school in advertising.

After the first year, Fr. Manno saw “a little spike in interest” about the school. “The efforts are beginning to bear fruit,” he said. “It’s going to take time.”

One initiative has already succeeded. The school now invites all parishioners to school functions. Each parishioner received an invitation and raffle tickets for the school’s biggest fund-raiser, the annual Irish Hooley. In 2015, the event raised $15,000; in 2016 it raised $65,000. Proceeds from the Hooley go to tuition assistance.

One popular activity is the limo lunch with the pastors, an item in the Hooley’s auction. “We hop in with about eight kids, and they love it,” Fr. Manno said.
Just as important as the money is the presence of Fr. Manno and Parochial Vicar Rev. Jason Hage, said Sr. Christina.

“They have to see us as normal, everyday people enjoying our lives,” Sr. Christina said. “How else are we going to get new entrants into religious life and the priesthood?”

“Anything we do now, it’s not just Holy Family Church. It’s both,” Fr. Manno said. Feedback so far suggests people notice the efforts. Recently, a parishioner told the pastor new signs on the gym are “a reminder that we have a school, and it’s a blessing.”

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Students from the Cathedral Academy at Pompei showcase the beauty, talents and diversity of its student body through a quilt pieced together by volunteers after school families were asked to design squares that reflected the various countries and cultures from which they came. With a population that includes students not only from the United States, but from countries around the globe, the final product is a statement to the how the school embraces the various backgrounds and experiences of its students and families. The quilt is currently on display in the halls of CAP for all to see.
Willenbarg Center to Enhance Arts, Athletics, Community at Notre Dame

BY DYANN NASHTON

W here there had always been lawn and a gravel driveway at the Notre Dame’s Jr./Sr. High campus, the school’s imposing new 14,000 square-foot building is taking shape. The new Msgr. Francis J. Willenburg Center is the only new major construction project to take place in decades at any of the Syracuse Diocese schools.

According to Sr. Anna Mae Collins, CSJ, principal, “This new building is named in memory of the beloved priest known throughout Central New York as an advocate for young people and as a devoted fan for many area schools and sports.”

Msgr. Willenburg was often described as a “fixture” at local athletic events of all types and during his lifetime was inducted into many area sports halls of fame. While serving as parish priest throughout the area, his devotion to those of all ages was well known — from his service as a counselor for the Utica division of the Oneida County Children’s Court, to his support of Camp Nazareth, to a board member of Catholic Charities, to a founding board member of St. Joseph’s Nursing Home.

In the spirit of Msgr. Willenburg, the center will enhance the experience at Notre Dame’s Campus for Catholic Education through arts, athletics and community events. The building features a multi-purpose design and will be a fully functional, independent space with a separate lobby and entrance.

The school, founded in 1960, will now have its first stage to host performing arts events, such as musical theater productions, which historically have been held off-site. The Willenburg Center will provide much needed additional gymnasium space featuring a regulation-size basketball court and bleachers. A concessions area and warming kitchen, restrooms, locker and dressing rooms and office space are also in the plans.

At a groundbreaking ceremony held in May 2016, Board Chairman Jim Joseph said, ‘Three years ago, we launched the multi-million dollar ‘Making our Kids World Ready’ capital campaign. We expressed our gratitude for the faith invested in us by the Diocese of Syracuse and the community. A short time later, when I spoke at the Class of 2013’s commencement, I looked the graduates in the eyes and told them that when they returned to Notre Dame for their fifth high school reunion as alumni, there would be a beautiful new building to welcome them. Today, we fulfill our promise to the students, alumni, Diocese and the community.”

An early proponent of the project was The Good News Foundation of Central New York. The Good News Foundation’s mission and vision embody sharing the love of Jesus Christ especially through strengthening families and parishes. On this underpinning, the nonprofit organization pledged a $4 million matching grant for the capital campaign.

“We committed to an agreement with Notre Dame … to provide up to $4 million dollars … if they would raise a similar amount and we’ve done this in steps,” said Good News Foundation.
Executive Director Michael Buckley, Notre Dame Class of 1969.

Another goal of the “Making Our Kids World Ready” capital campaign was to establish the school’s endowment fund. With an endowment in place, earnings will create an ongoing stream of tuition assistance for families seeking Catholic education, according to Notre Dame’s Chief Financial Officer Ken McCoy. The need for the endowment was confirmed in a 2014 Zogby Analytics Study of the school, which provided the following insight: “The only real impediment to growth is the cost of attendance.”

The new building is slated to be operational in time for the 2017-2018 school year. The project has been in good hands with many of those involved already part of the Notre Dame family.

Peter C. Murad, Notre Dame Class of 1980, principal architect with Architectural Resources of Buffalo said, “As a Notre Dame graduate, I am honored to have collaborated with the leadership of the school on the master plan and design. The building’s dynamic structural full-glazed facade serves as a beacon on campus, and the architecture embodies the vision of educational excellence and creativity.”

Several partners in the project, besides Murad, have their roots at Notre Dame. Joe Salerno, Notre Dame Class of 2000, is the owner of National Building & Restoration of Utica and is serving as general contractor. Clerk-of-the-Works Carson Sorrell’s children are Notre Dame graduates.

Salerno said, “It is a great opportunity to have a team whose members are all personally committed to the project. We all have Notre Dame in our hearts, and we’re all in this together.”

Dyann Nashton is a freelance writer from Oneida, New York.

Library/Media Center, Chromebooks Introduce 21st Century Learning at Holy Cross

In September, Holy Cross School in Dewitt unveiled its new library/media center, as well as 60 new Chromebooks for students use. Principal Martha O’Leary calls it “21st century learning” with tools that can be used inside the library or classroom depending on need.

The Chromebooks, a combination of a laptop computer and a tablet or iPad, replaced five-year-old desktop computers in the former library space with technology that is portable and offers students and faculty the latest capabilities. Students can work on the same document simultaneously for projects, and the Chromebook technology allows teachers to track each child’s individual contribution through a color-coded process.

They also can continue work done on the Chromebook at home through an individual log-in. Along with various other uses in the classroom, faculty can use the technology to project pages onto a larger screen in the library/media center.

The new library/media center is a great place to be with moveable book stacks and tables for various configurations of learning, as well as new carpeting, shelves, lighting, floor outlets and a conference room with a sliding door. The original idea to update the facility came from Judy De-Lorenzo, library/media specialist at Holy Cross, who half-jokingly mentioned it at a school board meeting. The idea took off and with the support of Holy Cross parents and parishioners, Pastor Msgr. J. Robert Yeazel, and the school’s PTA, which raised funds through its annual auction, the Holy Cross library/media center became a reality that will continue to foster digital learning at every grade level.
Bishop Ludden STEM Program Expands Student Skills

BY MICHCA BALLARD-FORTIN

STEM: an acronym for an educational program designed to prepare students for college and graduate study in the fields of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics. The original baseline of STEM studies aims to engage a student’s inquiring mind, foster logical reasoning, and develop collaboration and team-building skills. Once thought to be an advanced or progressive course of study, curriculums adapted around the STEM modality have proven to be necessary in any academic programming that strives to be exceptional. Students who are exposed to science and math in an engaging environment learn valuable lessons and skills for their future in any fields.

An example of STEM in action is quite literally on display in the classrooms at Bishop Ludden Jr./Sr. High School in Syracuse. Started as a Keystone Senior Project in the Fall of 2015, Bishop Ludden has captured student interest with an aquaponics project. The project was created to fulfill a graduation requirement and has led to a long-term initiative that is now being monitored and cared for by the next group of students.

Faculty advisors Karen McDonald, science, and Maxine Babcock, library, encouraged and supported three students as they built an aquaponics aquarium. The students applied for a grant for the startup money, built the aquarium and worked together to figure out the chemistry, learning how to monitor and maintain the fish and fauna inside. The students were recognized by local media for the creativity and skills they used to complete and maintain the fish in the project. Admittedly, the fish smell was overwhelming in some locations, but the aquarium has found a permanent home in a well-ventilated part of the school that is close to water and gives a new group of high school students a project to maintain.

In addition to being a great Senior Keystone Project, aquaponics has become the catalyst for students taking chances on other new STEM ideas. Students in the high school already had the Physics Club, Chemistry Club and the Science Olympiad, and with the buzz about aquaponics, Principal Brenda Reichert encouraged the faculty to continue to foster ideas from the students.

Armed with a financial sponsorship referral, Reichert went to her teachers and offered to support a robotics team. Babcock enlisted the support of science teacher Jennifer Andrews, new to the faculty, to build a first Bishop Ludden Robotics Team for the First Lego League program. The team was comprised of mostly middle school students who met once a week with Andrews and Babcock and FLL advisor Andrew Leary, an outside parent volunteer and member of the CNY Science & Robotics Association who has stepped up and sponsored the school’s FLL Robot Kit. They went on to build a robot and compete in a FLL competition. Not only was the group successful in working as a team to guide a robot on a mission, the advisors noticed that both boys and girls in many grade levels were showing interest in the other STEM extracurricular activities offered periodically.

This growing list of STEM extracurricular offerings is only possible because of the dedication of seasoned faculty like Dr. William Burnett, science, and Babcock, in addition to newer faculty like Andrews and Kyle Tierney, mathematics. Faculty connections and professional networks have offered Bishop Ludden student groups the opportunity to partner with East Syracuse-Minoa’s Chemistry Club to take on the Museum of Science and Technology Rocket Technological Association Central New York challenge this year and coordinate next summer’s Robotics Summer Camp to be bigger than before.

Participation in STEM Club adds to college resume building and demonstrates students overall commitment to their studies. The advisors hope that students with varied interests get involved in STEM Club activities, noting that is takes may different skills and interests — like journalism, social media, blogging, data monitoring — to work on a science team.

Michca Ballard-Fortin is the proud parent of two students in the Diocesan Catholic Schools.
The day before last June’s 6th grade graduation at St. Mary’s School in Cortland, 5th grade teacher Eileen Hoyt was notified by Principal Denise Hall that she would be receiving an award during the ceremony. Hoyt soon discovered that she was to receive the National Catholic Educational Association Alumni Award.

“I felt — and still feel — so very honored and blessed!” said Hoyt. “It is extremely humbling to be recognized in such a special way. I will always be grateful to Denise Hall for patiently going through all of the steps and making the time to complete the nomination process for me. She blessed me beyond.”

“This is the first time that someone in her age group has been a serious contender,” said Hall. “It’s not very common that you see someone so young who dedicates so much of her time to serving God. There were many reasons why I nominated her. She’s going to be our next saint. She’s unique and special, and she’s a role model for me.”

The National Catholic Educational Association has given out the award since 1991 to educators who personify dedication to Catholic education, faith and service as a teacher to student and school families.

Hoyt relishes the many opportunities to help her students “shine and learn to serve like Christ.” “We focus on doing ‘acts of love’ each day — those little things we don’t have to do, but those things we consciously choose to do for others, out of love for Christ,” she said. “These acts of love are little things that may cheer someone or lighten his or her load. Anytime we can complete small acts of love as a class, I feel as though we’ve accomplished something special for Christ, and the children feel the happiness that comes along with serving others.”

Hoyt and her class created “Project Sunshine,” a year-long effort to bring happiness into other people’s lives. The class plans an act of love for others and then surprises them with something special. They recently sent get well cards to the church secretary.

Hoyt noted some of the other activities she and her classes have helped orchestrate for the school and church community over the years, including participating in the annual Christmas Pageant and May Crowning. She and her class also visit the chapel weekly to pray the Rosary for those in need in the school community, and they often team up with the school’s second graders to make rosaries to hand out at church.

Along with her five siblings, Hoyt graduated from St. Mary’s. “It was, and continues to be, like a second home,” she said. “We knew we were safe and loved. We were a big family. I always felt Christ’s presence at school as a child — and still do as a teacher.”

Hoyt’s favorite teacher, Judy Johnson, inspired her to pursue teaching as a profession. “She radiated love,” remembered Hoyt. “We couldn’t wait for art class each week. She was an amazing artist — creative, innovative and motivating. But most of all, I remember how Mrs. Johnson’s love for God permeated all she did — the projects she chose, the way she spoke to her students and the smiles and encouragement she would give.”

After graduating from St. Mary’s in 1997 and Marathon Central High School in 2003, she continued her education at SUNY Cortland, earning a bachelor’s degree in childhood education in 2007 and a master’s degree in literacy education in 2009.

“I cherish the sound spiritual and academic foundation I received at St. Mary’s,” said Hoyt. “I feel blessed and privileged to be back here as a teacher. I am committed to perpetuating our Roman Catholic faith and upholding our strong academic ideals.”

Claudia Mathis is a freelance writer in Syracuse, New York.
SU’s Newhouse Research Class Helps MHR Develop Communications Strategies

BY CAROLINE K. REFF

Most Holy Rosary School in Syracuse has partnered with students from the S.I. Newhouse School of Communications at Syracuse University on a research project aimed at increasing effective communication.

Under the direction of Assistant Professor Christal Johnson, Ph.D., four groups of students taking Public Relations Research began working with Rosary Principal Jennifer Petosa in August 2016 on a project designed to provide real data that the school can use to develop feasible and concrete communication strategies. According to Johnson, many organizations aim for goals and objectives based only on ideas or assumptions that are not based on actual research, often wasting valuable time and dollars on projects that can miss the target.

The college students, all public relations majors at the nationally renowned communications school, have access to complex research applications like Sysomos, a social media, analytics and monitoring tool that allows for the creation of a research report for Rosary based on its individual needs. Students have visited the school on various occasions, conducting focus groups and surveys with parents and faculty, as well as observing the students and the school environment first hand. As part of the project, the students also examined trends in both Catholic and public education, both locally and on a national level, created target audience profiles, and looked at new ways for Rosary to improve its communications methods with both existing and prospective families.

The project is mutually beneficial to both Rosary and the Newhouse students. “It’s so much easier to learn about PR concepts when working with real life clients with actual needs,” said Taylor Sheehan, a junior majoring in public relations.

Added Rosary Principal Jennifer Petosa, “We are eager to tap into the resources of the Newhouse school and the talents of these future PR professionals in order to use real data analysis and create new channels of communication. The information we are receiving is so valuable, and Most Holy Rosary is thrilled to participate.”

The Public Relations Research class wrapped up in December with students presenting Most Holy Rosary with research-based data and information, as well as recommendations for moving forward in the school’s public relations and marketing initiatives. According to Petosa, Rosary hopes to use this information to pinpoint its communication efforts and continue to look for creative ways to attract new students and boost enrollment.

Caroline K. Reff is a freelance writer in Syracuse, New York, and a special projects consultant for the Catholic Schools Office.
How Does Your Garden Grow?

Students at Trinity Catholic School in Oswego, New York, excel inside the classroom, but they are learning some valuable lessons outside, too.

Last spring during Earth Week, students and faculty, under the direction of parent Kristen Kelly, were introduced to the concept of composting with the assistance of Jean Bonhotal from Cornell University’s Waste Management Institute. According to Principal Barbara Sugar, a few Trinity students who composted at home also shared their experiences.

With the help of the school’s head cook, Barbara Cummings, School Custodian Mark Lyle, and the cafeteria staff, student began a pilot program to compost lunchtime leftovers. The compost was brought to the Oswego West Side Community Garden, where Kelly secured a plot of land for Trinity to start a small crop of its own.

Volunteers spent the growing season planting, weeding and watering. As the harvest was collected, students donated the fruits and vegetables to Human Concerns, a food pantry that serves the surrounding community. The project will continue this spring, as students learn not only a valuable lesson in science but an appreciation for God’s bounty and the joy of giving to others.

Update on Pullano Family: Welcome, Baby Leah

(Editor’s note: In last year’s edition of Pillars, readers had a tremendous response to writer Christy Perry Twobey’s story about the Pullano family — Karen and Bill and their seven children — whose strong faith helped them through the loss of their son, Michael (“Mikey”) to cancer in 2008, and a daughter, Anna, in a 2013 traffic accident. At publication time last year, Karen and Bill were expecting another baby. Here’s a quick update on the family’s new addition.)

On June 29, 2016, Leah Denise Pullano arrived safe and healthy. She was originally due on Mikey’s 12th birthday, June 14, but, as often happens, due dates change, and the little bundle was born a few weeks later.

“She did not want to come out,” said Karen Pullano. “She was born 9 pounds, 4 ounces. She was a big girl.”

The older Pullano children, ages 3 to 20, all pitch in to take care of baby Leah. “They’re all really the most fun,” she said, adding that the extra sets of hands are especially helpful when Karen and Bill need to take others to doctors’ appointments, school events, gymnastics or even tackle driving lessons with some of the other kids.

Rev. Robert Hyde, pastor, baptized Leah Denise Pullano in August at the Pullano family’s parish, St. Margaret’s Church in Mattydale, New York.
After School Relocation, Family Remains Rome Catholic's Biggest Fans

BY RENÉE K. GADOUA

Fifth grader Isaiah Sexton thrives at Rome Catholic School. He participates in Mass, learned to play the recorder and baritone, and mentors younger students. He and his brother, Noah, a fourth grader, have participated in the school's running club, and the family loves the school's art classes, plays and seasonal concerts.

There was no question that Danielle and Charles Sexton would send their youngest child, Leah, there for pre-kindergarten this year. The Sextons consider Rome Catholic, a school of 74 pupils in Pre-K through Grade 6, a perfect fit for their children.

"The smaller environment and close attention allows the children to grow," Danielle Sexton said. "We want our children to get good academics and be taught to be good citizens. It's about making good life choices, and that's exactly what Catholic schools provide."

Count the Sextons as diehard fans of Rome Catholic, even as the school faces new challenges after moving from 800 Cypress St. to 400 Floyd Ave., the former St. Peter's School building. The school opened in September in a building that was previously used as a tutorial center for the Rome City School District. The school's previous location on Cypress Street was the site of the high school that closed in 2013.

"It was a right-sizing situation," said Patricia Bliss, who has been Rome Catholic's principal since 2013. "It was not good stewardship to be using a building with so many empty rooms."

The decision worried some parents but not the Sextons.

"For us, it's never been about the building," Charles Sexton said. "It's been about the environment and the teachers and the overall experience."

Besides, he added, the building is simply a better fit. "The old building was designed as a high school, and the building we went to was designed as an elementary school. When they go to the bathroom, the sinks are the appropriate size," he said.

As for the playground, Danielle Sexton said, "It fosters an environment where children are forced to be creative and play together. I see that as a benefit."

The Sextons grew up in Rome. Danielle attended the former Transfiguration Elementary School, and Charles went to public school. The family attends First Presbyterian Church in Rome.

They send their children to Catholic school because it reinforces their values. "First and foremost, we believe in family," Charles said. "We have family rules posted: Keep your promises. Think of others before yourself. Say 'I love you.' Do your best. Always tell the truth. We try to teach them that it's more important to be a good person than anything else in the world."

The Sextons are optimistic about the school's future and eager to share their view. They even have signs in their front yard advertising the school.

"We know we have to do everything in our power to make sure the school stays economically viable. We don't believe in being passive. We're working hard to get the word out about Rome Catholic and the valuable experience it offers."

— CHARLES SEXTON

Renée K. Gadoua is a freelance writer and editor. Follow her on Twitter @ReneeKGadoua.
Power of Prayer Brings Cat Home

Each day at St. Patrick’s School in Oneida starts with morning prayer led by Principal Kristin Healt. Months ago, one student, Natalie Crouch had a special intention. Her cat, Tommy, was missing, and she desperately wished for his safe return, so she asked school community to ask for some divine intervention.

“I put him on the prayer list at school,” said Natalie, “and during the morning announcements, my principal would announce his name, and we would all pray for him.”

Eight months went by, and Natalie’s family did not have much hope that their beloved cat would return, but the students continued to keep Tommy in their prayers. And, then it happened! Eight months after he went missing, Tommy sauntered into the Canastota home of the McQuaid family and made himself comfortable on the couch. Through social media and friends, the McQuaids were able to track down the Crouch family of Oneida and reunite Tommy with Natalie. Soon, he was back home, and the students at St. Patrick’s were thrilled to hear their prayers had been answered.

“I pray for anything that the students write down on the prayer request list,” said Healt. “No matter how small we may think it is, it is important to them. And, it worked!”
New Principals Mark Half-Way Point in School Year

With one semester under their belts, four new principals have settled in to their respective leadership roles in schools throughout the diocese. Each has taken on the joys and challenges of leading students, faculty and staff in environments with a strong emphasis on academics, character and faith.

“We are so blessed to have the talents and experience of these individuals in our schools,” said William Crist, superintendent of Catholic schools. “Each brings a wealth of experience and an enthusiasm for the job that will continue to help our students and school communities thrive.”

JAMES FOUNTAINE
Fountaine is the principal at St. John the Evangelist School in Binghamton. A graduate of Catholic Central High School, he earned a bachelor's degree in elementary education from St. Bonaventure University and a master's degree in education and administrative certification from SUNY Cortland. Before joining the diocesan schools, Fountaine was a teacher and administrator in the Union-Endicott School District from 1973 to 2010, during which he served as principal at two of the elementary schools. He is a very active member of his parish, Our Lady of Good Counsel in Endicott.

SUSAN KITCHEN
Kitchen is the principal at St. James Elementary School in Johnson City. She began her career as a teacher at Our Lady of Sorrows School in Vestal. Originally from Rochester, where she attended Catholic elementary school, Kitchen earned an associate's degree in early childhood education at SUNY Broome, a bachelor's degree in elementary education from SUNY Oneonta and a master's degree in education from SUNY Cortland. During her career, she also served as a teacher and Enrichment Program coordinator for the Binghamton City School District.

MATTHEW MARTINKOVIC
Martinkovic is the principal at Seton Catholic Central Junior/Senior High School in Binghamton. A graduate of Seton, Martinkovic is certified by New York State as a school district administrator and a secondary science teacher. He earned bachelor's and master's degrees in teaching from SUNY Cortland and completed his certification in school building leadership at Le Moyne College. Martinkovic previously served as principal of St. James Elementary School in Johnson City and has taught at several Catholic schools throughout Broome County, including St. Joseph's School, All Saints School and St. James.
BRIAN NOLAN

Nolan is the principal at Bishop Grimes, Junior/Senior High School in E. Syracuse after 31 years in the Syracuse City School District. Prior to joining Bishop Grimes, Nolan was most recently the executive director of high schools and career technical education for the SCSD. He also served as the principal at Corcoran High School from 2002 to 2008 and vice principal of Fowler High School from 1999 to 2002. He previously taught special education, as well as coached basketball and football. Nolan is a graduate of St. Brigid & St. Joseph Grammar School and is currently a parishioner at that parish. He earned his bachelor’s and master’s degrees in special education from Syracuse University and his certificate in advanced study in educational administration form SUNY Oswego.

(Editor’s note: Information for this piece was adapted from an article that appeared in The Catholic Sun in September 2016,)

EAGLES Program at Blessed Sacrament Teaches the Practice of Catholic Values

BY CHRISTY PERRY TUOHEY

When Andrea Polcaro first stepped into her job as principal of Syracuse’s Blessed Sacrament School, the school’s mascot was a scorpion. Thinking maybe a poisonous arachnid was not the best representative, she created a contest that allowed the students to choose what their next mascot would be. The winner? An eagle. “Soaring to new heights” became the school’s motto. Soon the winged raptor became more than a high-flying symbol for the school. EA-GLES became an acronym for a school-wide positive behavior program. The letters stand for:

- EXCELLENCE — doing your personal best
- ACCEPTANCE — treating others the way you want to be treated
- GOD-CENTERED — to act as Jesus would, showing respect for everyone and everything
- LEADERSHIP — doing what is right in leading the way
- EMPATHY — understanding others’ feelings
- SAFETY — being safe and free of injury

Guided by these principles, Kindergarten through 6th grade teachers use positive reinforcement and award students’ good behavior in different ways. If students are “caught showing their EAGLES pride,” they might be walking quietly, hands at their sides in the hallways or stairways, exhibiting the safety “S” of EAGLES.

“Teachers nominate children that have shown their EAGLES pride for students of the month,” Polcaro explained. “And each month, I read over the PA or at a special assembly why they’ve been nominated, and then they get an EAGLE.”

The coveted EAGLE is a certificate that includes a paper circle with an image of the mascot.

“IT creates a more positive atmosphere,” Polcaro said, “and teaches children good Christian Catholic values and how to practice them.”
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