Pillars

Building a Strong Foundation Through Catholic Education in the Roman Catholic Diocese of Syracuse

WINTER 2020
A LETTER FROM THE SUPERINTENDENT

Dear Friends of Catholic Education:

While I visit schools frequently and interact with students and principals almost daily, I don’t always have the good fortune of seeing all of our schools’ accomplishments in person. For that reason, it is such a joy to read about some of the outstanding things that are happening in our schools in the pages of Pillars magazine. This issue provides exactly that, and I hope you, too, will enjoy reading about some of the best practices, real life experiences and even the human emotion of those presently engaged in the 22 Catholic schools of the Syracuse Roman Catholic Diocese.

This issue’s interview with Bishop Lucia is particularly insightful, as he shares his thoughts and his deep commitment to our Catholic schools throughout the diocese. I think you will enjoy his detailed and thoughtful perspective on the role Catholic schools fulfill and what we can expect to see in the future as we enter a new decade under his leadership. I was particularly touched by the story of the Deckers and the many generations of family members who have showed an unwavering commitment to Blessed Sacrament School. Family is, after all, at the foundation of our Catholic teachings, only to be enhanced in our classrooms, parishes and communities. One of my favorite stories is about 4-H winner Lily Marshman, a student at Holy Family School in Norwich. The loyalty she has, not only to her Holstein cows but to her family’s farming legacy, is a true example of the character building we seek to foster in all of our schools. Kudos to all who have submitted news of the various ways they continue to educate our students and spread the Gospel message.

These stories, along with the many other successes in our schools, are true testaments to the family and student-centered, faith-based education our children are receiving. Our public school counterparts certainly promote community service and learning, but I believe we have that slight edge with our ability to live the Gospel, pray and share in the evangelizing mission in Jesus’ name during each school day.

Our schools are thriving, but maintaining that momentum is no easy task, and we can’t do it without the support of our parents, faculty and staff, alumni, benefactors, clergy, and, of course, our new bishop. We continue to refine and innovate our educational offerings. For example, right now we are making strategic and impactful pursuits into how we can leverage the importance of early childhood education both for the benefit of our youngest children and continued healthy enrollment in our schools. Through this analysis, we are holding true to our Catholic traditions while ensuring that our students are getting a state-of-the-art, meaningful education.

Amazingly, we are half-way through the academic year. However, the 2020 calendar has just begun and with that comes more teaching, learning, planning and strategizing — all for our children and based on our commitment to learn, serve, lead and succeed. Thanks to all who help to support the vibrancy and mission of our Catholic schools. I wish you and your families well in this new year.

Yours in Christ,

William Crist
Superintendent of Catholic Schools
Bishop Lucia: Thoughts on Catholic Education in the Syracuse Diocese

BY RENÉE K. GADOUA

Bishop Douglas J. Lucia grew up in Altona, in the Diocese of Ogdensburg in northern New York. The small town – population 2,887 – had no Catholic schools, so Lucia went to public school. “We would literally walk every Tuesday from the school to the parish center for religious instruction,” he said. “Church was just part of our day. I was an altar server. I was always getting out of school to serve funerals.”

While ministering in the Ogdensburg Diocese, he taught junior high religion for three years. As pastor of St. Mary’s in Canton, New York, he worked with the staff of the parish elementary school. Now, as the recently appointed Bishop of the Syracuse Roman Catholic Diocese, Lucia oversees 22 Catholic schools in seven counties.

A month into his first academic year as bishop, he shared his thoughts on Catholic schools. Here are excerpts of that interview, condensed and edited for clarity.

What is your sense of the health of the Catholic school system in the Syracuse Diocese?

I’m impressed with the number of Catholic schools in the diocese. I was the pastor of a parish with a Catholic school for almost 10 years at St. Mary’s in Canton, so I know the struggle. There’s always a balancing act between tuition costs and the needs of the student population. One of the big challenges that’s common to the Northeast is the declining population. As the demographics change, we’re trying to come up with new and innovative ways to keep our schools healthy.

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At its high point, the diocese ran 96 schools. Now there are 22. Is it just the population decline? Families are smaller. It’s also the place of religion in society today. When I grew up, church was just part of the fabric of our lives. There was no question: You went to Sunday Mass. You went to religious education. Today there’s a greater challenge. There are many things that can distract us, and religion can be put on the back burner.

Catholic schools were started in this country, in part, to counter anti-Catholic attitudes and support Catholic families. Is the purpose the same today?

I think of one of the founders of the Catholic school system, St. Elizabeth Ann Seton. Her whole purpose was to provide an education for those who were not able to receive one. She wanted to provide an educational opportunity for those who might be out on the margins.

Mother Frances Cabrini came as an Italian immigrant, but her whole purpose was again founding schools and orphanages to take care of the immigrants of the day. I think that in particular where we find the origin of our Catholic school system really is in trying to serve the needs of society.

Several of the diocese’s Catholic school populations reflect recent immigration trends. How do Catholic schools serve people on the margins today?

It is the same role that Mother Cabrini and St. Elizabeth Ann Seton played. It’s helping those who are in need, those who are seeking a home, those who are seeking to build family. It’s providing young people the opportunity to use their potential and not feel like they’re always going to be second-class citizens. Yes, we are citizens of this nation, but even more importantly we’re citizens of the kingdom of God.

How do you teach that message while respecting religious differences of students who are not Catholic? When they come to a Catholic school, they will learn about the Catholic faith. But there’s always a respect about their own practice. They will always be encouraged to be, in their own traditions, men and women of prayer. One of the great missions is to teach respect for one another, respect for authority, respect for creation.

How should Catholic schools address this moment of extreme partisanship in Washington and throughout society?

I think we have to talk to students about what it really means to respect one another and what it really means when we talk about the Golden Rule: Love God and love your neighbor as yourself. How do we live out that rule, which is common to many faith traditions? What does that look like?

We have to challenge our young people that maybe today the adults are not setting the example they should. If we say we’re Christian, are we living that way? Sometimes we think obedience is just doing everything someone tells us. Real obedience is the ability to listen to one another and to respond to one another and care for one another.

What do you say to a parent who wants something that Catholic schools can’t provide?

Part of the mission of Catholic schools is integrity, and they have to remain true to who they are. True to who we are is not necessarily keeping up with the Joneses and having everything just given to us and that life is not a competition. But I think we offer them something that is not necessarily found in the public sector, and that is faith-based education. In a Catholic school, God is part of the picture.

Catholic schools offer the choice to look at our world from a different perspective. That is not just the perspective of “How do I get ahead?” We teach that God has a plan. They’re part of a bigger plan. They’re part of God’s plan. Their worth is not what they do. Their worth is who they are.

People frequently point to the discipline that Catholic schools traditionally offer. What do you say to a parent with a child who’s not fitting in at public school?

Our Catholic schools can offer an opportunity for such children to know that they are loved and welcomed. The
Catholic school has an advantage in that they might be able to offer a child a different way of learning and more individual attention.

Do you see a time when we might not have any Catholic schools here?

Even as we face lower numbers of students, we want to be able to provide the option for Catholic education, and I don’t see us changing in that mission. What shape will it take? That’s where creativity is needed.

There’s a question of what critical mass is needed. It is not just a financial consideration: it’s also a social consideration. It can’t be so small that (students) don’t experience what it means to encounter and stand side-by-side with others.

The church needs to maximize its mission, and in maximizing its mission, sometimes it will be the question of “Well, do we need all these buildings for the mission? What can better serve the mission for me?” Will there be fewer schools? I would suspect yes, but, at the same time, will those schools then be part of a bigger mission? Yes.

Last year after the Parkland mass shooting, there were very big student walkouts across the country. Many students walked out recently after Greta Thunberg spoke at the United Nations about climate change. What is the role of Catholic school students in these civic conversations?

I really want our Catholic school students to give witness to the issues of the day. I want them to have the background they need in order to make informed choices. We also want to respect the wisdom of our elders. There might come a point where we have to say very vocally, very loudly, “Is this really what you want to teach us?”

Scripture says, “And a little child shall lead them.” And there’s the book “All I Really Need To Know I Learned in Kindergarten.” I think we forget those lessons. Our young people help us to remember some important lessons.

Renée K. Gadoua is a freelance writer and editor and a frequent contributor to The Catholic Sun. Follow her on Twitter @ReneeKGadoua.

Saintly Scene at IC

Students from Immaculate Conception School in Fayetteville dressed in costume to represent their favorite saints on Nov. 1, 2019, All Saints Day. The children planned and attended Mass for the Holy Day of Obligation, and the “saints” were introduced during the homily.
County Executive McMahon Shares Good Memories of Catholic Education

BY RENÉE K. GADOUA

When Ryan McMahon thinks about his Catholic school days, he thinks first of family.

“I went to Most Holy Rosary and my siblings did and lots of cousins were there, as well,” he said. “My extended McMahon family is just massive.”

Onondaga County Executive McMahon grew up in Syracuse’s Strathmore area, a neighborhood full of relatives. After Most Holy Rosary, he attended Bishop Ludden High School and graduated from Le Moyne College in 2002.

“My best friends to this day went to elementary school with me and then went on to Bishop Ludden,” he said. “Those are my best friends in the world.”

Now 39, McMahon lives just outside Syracuse in the town of Onondaga with his wife, Caitlin. The McMahons have three children: Jack, 11; Madeline, 9; and Andrew, 3. Caitlin McMahon works as a teaching coach in the Baldwinsville School District.

In November 2019, McMahon won election as Onondaga County executive, a year after being appointed to the position when Joanie Mahoney resigned to take another job. He previously served seven years as chairman of the county legislature and six years as a Syracuse city councilor.

McMahon unabashedly cheerleads for Central New York’s past, present and potential. He points to a family tradition of volunteer work and public service. His parents work for the city of Syracuse and relatives founded the McMahon Ryan Child Advocacy Center, a Syracuse agency that provides education and services to combat child abuse and human trafficking.

“It was always about family and about service and different ways of helping people,” he said of his upbringing. “We were always kind of involved in helping people, giving back with the Church and different things.” The child advocacy center evolved out of “our family looking to do something for the community in an area that needed help.”

And he’s proud to talk about the role Syracuse Catholic schools play in his family story. “They’re good memories,” he said, laughing. “Sister Helen Ann was my principal, and I had Sister Jean as my first-grade teacher, and Sister Mary Immaculate was my second-grade teacher. … It was fantastic.”

He recently toured Syracuse’s Cathedral Academy at Pompei in his role as county executive and recognized the names on some doors. “It made me smile,” he said. “I think that tells you something. They’re very talented individuals who probably turned down many jobs over the years to work for the Catholic schools.”

When it came time for his oldest, Jack, to start school, alma mater Most Holy Rosary was the obvious choice. Jack’s sister, Madeline, happily followed, although she now attends public school. Andrew, 3, most likely, will go to Rosary.

McMahon played basketball, soccer and lacrosse while attending Catholic school and played soccer at Le Moyne College. Now he coaches Rosary’s basketball team.”
They’re like real family,” he said. “They have small classes and they get engaged, and they really are like brothers and sisters.”

He sees the region’s public and private schools as complementing each other. “Parents today have the luxury where they can figure out what school is best for their kid,” he said. “And for my son Jack, there was no question from the get-go. We knew Jack needed a smaller classroom environment.”

Catholic schools also “lay down a foundation of morality and ethics,” he added. “They also provide that opportunity to have a small environment, and it’s a diverse environment.”

McMahon, ever the community cheerleader, praised Catholic schools for their unique role supporting new Americans and fostering respect for immigrants and refugees.

“We’ve had a lot of success with a lot of (people) becoming great, productive citizens,” he said. “These children appreciate what this country has to offer because they remember why they had to leave their home. These children are our future.”

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The Cathedral Academy at Pompei loves to embrace the many backgrounds of its students. Last year, the school began a new tradition, a cultural celebration of diversity. Student and their parents, representing more than 19 countries, presented informational boards about their native lands and served a variety of delicious foods from their various cultures. Many dressed in clothing representing their countries, and students entertained with cultural singing and dance. “It was an inspiring event that brought together our school, families and community to stand proudly representing the cultures and gifts given by God,” said Principal Tina Seymour. The second annual Cultural Celebration is scheduled for June 2020.
Holy Family Sixth Grader Learns Values Through 4-H

BY CAROLINE K. REFF

Any students at Holy Family School in Norwich can’t wait to get home after school to see their dogs or cats. However, sixth grader Lily Marshman hurries home to see her Holsteins.

“My cows are very special to me,” said Lily. “They are fun to play around with, and I like to see what they do, as they do some funny things. It’s fun to snuggle with them, too.”

Lily is the seventh generation on her family’s farm, Tiger Lily Holsteins, in Oxford, New York. The farm has been in her father’s family since 1856, and Lily is proud to be a part of it. So much so that she is learning more about farming, agriculture, and animals through her participation in 4-H. The youth development program of the Cooperative Extension System and the USDA, 4-H strives to develop citizenship, leadership, responsibility and life skills, particularly in the areas of science, health, agriculture and civic engagement. The four Hs stand for head, heart, hand and health and are the guiding principles of this nonprofit organization.

Since she was a little girl, Lily watched older children participate in 4-H activities and couldn’t wait for her opportunity, particularly when it came to showing cows. (4-H requires children to be between the ages of 8 and 18 to compete.) Now, she is an experienced competitor, traveling to county fairs, competitions around the Northeast, the Great New York State Fair in Syracuse and even the World Dairy Expo in Madison, Wisconsin. While Lily has several cows, she seems especially proud of Snow White and Rhyme, two of the Holsteins she recently showed in competition.

Lily competed at the World Dairy Expo with Snow White, a cow that “is a princess just like her name,” as the Holstein sometimes has a mind of her own. The cow received middle of her class at the expo. “That’s pretty good, as there are cows there from all over the U.S. and Canada competing,” Lily explained. Her other Holstein, Rhyme, took second place at a show in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, and first place at the 2019 New York State Fair.

Lily’s 4-H activities are not limited to cows, however. The organization also offers lessons and competitions in skills like sewing and baking. She has won several awards for her family recipe, 1856 Muffin Mix (named after the year the Marshman farm was founded), including a blue ribbon at the county fair and a purple ribbon at the New York State Fair. While she won’t divulge the secret ingredients, her muffin mix can be purchased at the farmers market in Oxford, as well as on Instagram. “They taste really good!” she said.

Her parents are proud of Lily’s accomplishments, particularly the development of the good values she
gets at home that are reinforced at Holy Family School and through her 4-H activities. "As a prospective seventh generation of a family business, it's important that we teach her good values," said her mom, Sheila Marshman, who grew up on a Vermont dairy farm herself and is also an associate professor in the division of animal and plant sciences & agricultural business at SUNY Morrisville. "I'd say Holy Family School helped to plant the seed, and 4-H helped that to grow."

Lily has certainly fostered the lessons learned at school, according to Principal Tom Sorci, who noted that she's an honor student and likes to spend time reading to the 3 and 4 year olds in Holy Family's Pre-K program. Last year, Lily was nominated by the school to attend the Visions STEM Camp at the University of Pittsburgh, where she was able to apply a lot of her farming and 4-H skills to some of the activities there. "She's amazing," said Sorci. "She's such a good student and a really outstanding member of our community."

For now, Lily will continue to work hard in school, care for her cows, sell her muffins and take part in 4-H activities. She's proud of her family's legacy and hopes she might one day be in charge of Tiger Lily Farms.

Certainly, Lily's parents would like to see that happen — but only if it makes her happy. "If that's what she chooses to do, that's great, but if she wants to go off and do something else, that's OK, too," said Sheila Marshman. "Agriculture is a good tool for teaching how to be a good community member, giving back to the community and how to be a good citizen. As long as she's a good citizen of the earth and gives back to the community, we'll be happy."

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It’s Not Easy Being a Girl:  
God’s Saintly Girls Club Helps Empower Female Students

BY CAROLINE K. REFF

There’s no denying, it’s not easy being a girl — but often just talking through issues and challenges, along with a little bit of prayer and focus on service to others, can make all the difference. That’s the idea behind God’s Saintly Girls Club at All Saints Catholic School in Endicott, New York.

The group was established two years ago when Janice Planavsky, a special education teacher at All Saints, joined the faculty. She had seen similar models work in the public school system and approached the principal about starting a group. ELA teacher Tina Waffle liked the idea, too, and joined with Planavsky to assist.

Each month, a group of girls in Grade 2 through Grade 6 get together for a couple of hours after school. The meetings always open with a prayer, followed by an organized discussion about the girls’ issues or concerns, both in and outside of school. Much of the talk revolves around how girls treat each other, which makes for some important talks, said Planavsky. The rest of the meeting time is spent with activities, snacks, planning upcoming service projects and allowing the girls to open up about any other concerns they may have.

“It's a group where girls can support and empower each other while also reaching out to support and empower others in our community,” said Waffle.

The girls know from the start that God’s Saintly Girls Club is a safe environment where they can share whatever they want to say without worry that it will be discussed outside of the group.

“When you go into Girls’ Club, you know that you can trust and have fun there every single time,” said Danni Standish, a sixth grader at the school.

Fifth grade student Molly Burke added, “In the group, I feel safe to talk about problems I’m having because I know I can trust the people around me.”

In addition to discussions, the club members also organize service projects, which not only help others but build a sense of camaraderie among the group. Two recent projects included making dog biscuits for a local animal shelter and creating cards for residents of an area nursing home. A “lock in dinner” and a pizza party are also planned for later in the year to continue building friendships among the girls.

There are about 30 regular members in the club, and Planavsky was pleased to see many Second Grade girls join this school year. To bridge the age gap, she often pairs an older student with a younger student to promote trust and communication among the members.

“All of our activities are about just being a girl and hanging out, talking, listening, praying and helping each other understand how hard it is for
every girl to be a girl today. We stress how important it is to be kind to one another," Planavsky said. “There's always going to be drama and gossip out there, so we make it a point to let them know that we don't talk about girls who aren't here. Instead, we discuss what is the best way to talk to each other and ask questions like ‘Would God want us to talk like this?’ or ‘How do we act in a Catholic school?’”

Both Planavsky and Waffle enjoy helping the girls work through their concerns. They know the club members look forward to the conversations, attention and feeling of belonging that they receive at the God’s Saintly Girls’ Club meetings.

“Sometimes there’s a lot of chatter,” said Planavsky, “but they come in with a smile and leave with a smile. That makes it all worth it.”

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Meatball Madness
Sixth graders from Cathedral Academy at Pompei appeared on News Channel 9’s “Bridge Street” in November to show the audience how to roll meatballs, while promoting the parish’s annual Election Day Spaghetti Supper. More than 6,000 meatballs are served at this popular community event each year!
St. Margaret’s Faculty Embraces Service With a Hot Meal

BY CAROLINE K. REFF

In November, St. Margaret’s School Principal Michael McAuliff decided to use a staff development day for a special project. Together, 12 members of the faculty and staff spent the afternoon preparing and dishing up meals at the Samaritan Center, a local nonprofit that offers hot, nutritious meals to the needy of the Syracuse community. The Samaritan Center serves more than 11,000 meals a month, seven days a week, and relies heavily on the help of volunteers in the community.

“Instead of a typical staff development day, we decided to roll up our sleeves and practice what we preach: service to others,” said McAuliff, noting that most of the group had never been to the Samaritan Center before. “It was a humbling experience that opened up a lot of people’s eyes, as they saw people from all walks of life — children, families, even men in suits — line up for a meal that day. Hunger knows no limits, and that’s something a lot of us take for granted.”

While St. Margaret’s School has always been community service minded, McAuliff thought a cohesive theme for the academic year might help guide the efforts of teachers and students. This year, “feeding the hungry” was the specific focus selected, so the trip to the Samaritan Center seemed very appropriate.

The students also work around this theme. One of this year’s activities is Sandwiches for Service, where students make about 200 sandwiches each month for the Oxford Inn, a men’s shelter in the city of Syracuse. Parents pitch in, too, as they are asked to donate bottled water, chips and granola bars to round out the meals.

St. Margaret’s families are also very generous toward the parish food pantry, which serves not only those in the community but very likely some of the students who attend the school. “Our students understand that the donations they bring to the food pantry just might be helping one of their classmates,” said McAuliff.

McAuliff is a strong believer that teaching children of every age about service is almost as important as the academics. “Teaching kids to count is fine, but teaching what counts is what really matters,” he said.

And, while he’s certain his faculty and staff are already very aware of the importance of service to others, he figured there was no better reminder than rolling up their sleeves and living the Gospel message by feeding the hungry at the Samaritan Center. He said, “Hopefully, we all went home looking at the food we prepared for our own meals that night in a slightly different way.”

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Trinity Parent Made Oswego Children’s Museum Come to Life

BY RENÉE K. GADOUA

On a rainy October afternoon, several small children played at the Children’s Museum of Oswego’s water table. The children lined up wooden boats, cast for toy fish and created rain at the custom-made display. The water table celebrates Oswego – including Lake Ontario and local weather: wind and rain.

“Play is a way to learn,” said Jill Shaver, executive director of the downtown Oswego facility and mom to two children currently attending Trinity Catholic School. “Kids need places where they can explore and learn.”

All the exhibits in the 10,000-square-foot museum celebrate Central New York and Oswego. On the second floor, the Town Square features small exhibits sponsored by local business. Visitors can play and learn at a café, credit union, dentist, cider barn and more. At the Oswego Speedway exhibit, visitors try to beat their siblings’ or friends’ speed in changing tires.

Another exhibit, sponsored by Novelis, illustrates how aluminum is recycled. Children can don silver jackets and walk through huge, padded rollers that show how aluminum sheets are created.

The Cloud Climber offers a jungle gym experience (think the McDonald’s play centers of days gone by — but much nicer.) In addition to letting small museum-goers blow off some steam, the Cloud Climber provides simple physics and weather lessons. Children (or adults!) can insert light scarves into a hole and watch them make their way through pipes, eventually falling, representing rain.

“Kids get to touch everything,” Shaver said. The interactive, hands-on exhibits and activities are appropriate for infants to children age 12. They “show what’s in the community to be proud of;” she added. “If you’re not from here, this shows you what makes us great.”

Shaver is not from Oswego, but she’s grown to love the small city. The Connecticut native moved to Syracuse in 2012 with her husband, Jonathan Shaver, who grew up in Oswego, and their two children, then 2 and 3. Andrew is a sixth grader at Trinity Catholic School in Oswego; Madeleine is a fifth grader. Jonathan, who previously served in the U.S. Navy, works at Nine Mile Point Nuclear Station. He’s president of the museum’s board of trustees and runs Trinity Catholic School’s science club.

Shaver studied child development and psychology in college. She became interested in children’s museums when her family moved numerous times for John’s Navy jobs. She tested the concept for Oswego from 2013 to 2016, when she ran a museum without walls in local schools, libraries and community sites. The Children’s Museum of Oswego then bought the former Buckout-Jones building at West First and Bridge streets. The museum closed in June 2018 for renovations and reopened in January 2019.

“The children’s museum is a very important piece of our downtown and has done a magnificent job bringing visitors and activity to our core downtown,” Oswego Mayor Billy Barlow told OswegoCountyNewsNow.com in 2018.

During the summer, attendance reached 350 people a day. Weekends were even busier, Shaver said. It’s not uncommon for families to go to the museum in the morning, leave for lunch or naps, then return in the afternoon. Some families come more than once a week.

Shaver’s affection for Oswego extends to the Catholic school her children attend. “I watched kindergarteners playing with sixth graders,” she said. “You don’t see that everywhere. They watch out for everyone. Your child is not going to get left behind there.”

She’s confident Trinity Catholic is preparing her children for life after elementary school. “They’re learning the foundations and know right from wrong,” she said. “Friendships are really strong there, and they look out for one another.”

Andrew and Madeleine often help at the museum. “To us that’s part of character building,” Shaver said. “You have to work hard to achieve.”

Creating a successful children’s museum is a dream come true for Shaver. “One of the reasons we moved here was we felt we could make a difference,” she said. “It’s easier to be part of a community if you’re involved in it. You see things happen and it becomes contagious.”

For more information on the Children’s Museum of Oswego, visit www.cmoo.org.

Renée K. Gadoua is a freelance writer and editor and a frequent contributor to The Catholic Sun. Follow her on Twitter @ReneeKGadoua.
Alexandria Cresci, Notre Dame Jr./Sr. High School’s 2019 valedictorian, is up and at ’em early these days, rising at 5 a.m. to participate in physical training with the other members of her Army ROTC unit at Boston College in Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts.

The biology major is aiming to serve in active duty in the Army after graduation, following in the service footsteps of both her parents and her uncles, cousins and grandfathers.

Having been raised in a military family, ROTC and military service are in her blood, she explained. “I think it’s a way to serve other people in a big-picture type of situation,” she said.

As a student at Notre Dame, Cresci was not only a member of the ROTC, but, over the course of her six years at the school, also ran track and cross country, played basketball, participated in the cheerleading club, served as president of the pro-life club, and played clarinet in the senior band. All this in addition to earning top academic marks. Balancing it all could be tough but “it always got done, somehow, some way,” she said.

She has a similar mindset these days, as she settles into a large community far from home. “One of the biggest challenges is time management and having so much work thrown at you,” she said. “Everyone says, ‘Oh, college is so much fun. Being on your own is great!’ However, it is difficult to navigate your way through at first. You have to find a balance.”

Cresci hopes to use her science education to serve in the Army in an investigative and research capacity, perhaps in evidence collection or crime scene investigation. Aside from the early morning runs, weight training, and marches, her ROTC duties entail a weekly class and serving in the honor guard at BC football games. She’s also singing in the church choir, playing intramural basketball and has joined the campus ministry team and the pro-life club.

“The most fun part is the camaraderie of campus life, especially at football, hockey and basketball games. There are always events happening on campus, as well, such as guest speakers, dance-offs, concerts and food drives,” she said.

Cresci credits her Catholic education with setting her up for success in college.

“Notre Dame Jr./Sr. High School prepared me immensely for life at Boston College. I had a strong foundation for my faith, academics and time management. The faculty at Notre Dame took the time to understand me as a person, while pushing me to better myself each day,” she said, noting that the one-on-one attention given to her and her classmates made a difference.

After her time at Notre Dame, Cresci also decided to consider only Catholic institutions for college. “Faith has been a big part of my life,” she said. “Going to a Catholic high school and then trying to grow in faith into a Catholic college was one of my goals in life.”

She chose Boston College “due to its great academic reputation and its location, just outside urban Boston.” More importantly, the school mantra of “Men and women for and with others” was enlightening. The university puts an emphasis that growing in faith and love should be shown through service to one another.”

And Cresci said she’s going to church more now than she did in high school, thanks in part to the chapel in the basement of her dorm. “I don’t even have to walk — it’s just down the stairs!” she said.

To her Catholic school peers considering their next steps, Cresci offers some sage advice:

“There are times when you will feel alone. There are times when you will feel completely lost with yourself. There are times when you lack confidence. During these moments, it’s essential to rely on your faith. God is always with you, even when you may not realize it. God is in the eyes of those who love you and want the best for you. Lean on other people. Let others lean on you. We will always think about who we will lift up when we climb. Know you are genuinely loved and have the strength to conquer anything with faith.”
Congratulations to all of our 2019 Valedictorians

**BISHOP GRIMES JR./SR. HIGH SCHOOL**

Raquel McDonald, Bishop Grimes Jr./Sr. High School’s 2019 valedictorian, is a dual major in criminal justice and psychology at Thiel College in Greenville, Pennsylvania. She hopes to pursue a career in criminal profiling or crime scene analysis after college.

McDonald says her Catholic education prepared her well for college, giving her a leg up on tackling big questions, writing well, communicating effectively with teachers, and handling stress. A member of the Cobra pep and jazz bands and the bowling, golf and volleyball teams, McDonald also credits her years at Grimes with teaching her time management, a skill serving her well now as she balances two majors and spots on the women’s volleyball team and the golf team.

Having settled into the rhythm of college life, McDonald has some insight for students looking toward higher education: College is a new chapter and you don’t need to be defined by your past. “Focus on yourself and your grades!” McDonald said.

**BISHOP LUDDEN JR./SR. HIGH SCHOOL**

Thomas Westers, Bishop Ludden Jr./Sr. High School’s 2019 valedictorian, is studying finance at Penn State Harrisburg. The college was not on Westers’ radar until late August heading into his senior year, he said, when he got a call from the school’s baseball coach. A pitcher for the Gaelic Knights, Westers had always wanted to play baseball in college, and, after visiting the college and seeing the great education offered and the small class sizes, he jumped at the opportunity.

“I would be crazy not to,” he said. Westers and the team are already at work five days a week and games begin in February.

At Ludden, Westers was not only a member of the baseball team, he also played guitar in the high school and jazz bands, was a member of the basketball team, worked stage crew and served as a peer minister in the campus ministry program. All this in addition to earning top academic honors each year and graduating with a 4.0 GPA.

Looking back on his six years at Ludden, Westers said his biggest takeaway from his Catholic education was values. Ludden “instilled really good values in me — how to go about things the right way,” he said. Those values are serving him well at college, from meeting with professors to interacting with other students to developing friendships with his new classmates.

To his former classmates at his alma mater, Westers urged them to “live in the moment” and not to take anything for granted. “If you want to do something, do it,” he said. “Go for it. Go with your gut.”

**SETON CATHOLIC CENTRAL SCHOOL**

Zihan (Nancy) Zhang, Seton Catholic Central’s 2019 valedictorian, came to the Southern Tier in 2016 as an exchange student from Chendu, China, and is continuing her education at UCLA.

“I decided to attend Seton Catholic Central because I have always been embracing different beliefs, people and lifestyles,” she said. Before becoming a Seton student, she told administrators she wanted “to learn theology here and try to look at things from a different perspective. It does prove to me that studying in a different country and a different belief while surrounded by people from different backgrounds is an enriching yet challenging experience.”

Zhang is studying chemical engineering at UCLA and though she “can see myself going down several different paths” professionally, she knows she’ll be “pursuing a master’s degree some time in my life.”

Zhang said her Catholic school education helped to prepare her for college by helping her “become a more compassionate and empathetic person, which is important in building relationships and communicating with people. In college, I not only need to collaborate with my classmates but also need to make friends and network. While interacting with different people, I found the Catholic education that I received really helped me get along and get close with them.”

Katherine Long is the editor of The Catholic Sun, the news media of the Diocese of Syracuse. Some portions of the profiles here were first published a June 2019 edition of The Catholic Sun.
Decker Family Has Made Lasting Impact Through 100 Years at Blessed Sacrament

BY CHRISTY PERRY TUOHEY

You may remember a coffee and doughnut franchise slogan from a few years back, "America runs on Dunkin.'" Change those words around a little and you have some truth in advertising about Syracuse's Blessed Sacrament Church and School: "Blessed Sacrament runs on Deckers."

In the past century, five generations of an Eastwood family have worshiped at, studied in and worked for Blessed Sacrament Parish. As the church prepares to celebrate its centennial in 2021, two members of the Decker family who now work side-by-side at Blessed Sacrament School can claim that their ancestors were there when the church doors opened in 1921.

“Our grandparents would have helped put those cornerstones into place,” said Mary Lynn Decker Giacobbe, the school’s music teacher and church organist. Her brother Bobby Decker is Blessed Sacrament facilities manager. He said that both sides of his parents’ families have been involved in many aspects of parish life throughout the 20th century.
Their maternal grandparents were there in the beginning, and Bobby and Mary Lynn’s parents continued the tradition. “Our parents both went to school here,” Mary Lynn explained. “That would have been in the ‘mid to late ’40s,” Bobby estimated.

They are two of six children, all of whom attended the school. When Mary Lynn began kindergarten at Blessed Sacrament in 1965, and Bobby joined her at the school in 1967, their grandmother Norma Decker was the school secretary. And that’s not where the grandparent/parent involvement ended. “When we got to Bishop Grimes, my mother was the secretary and worked in PR,” Mary Lynn said.

Their parents volunteered at Blessed Sacrament, as well. “I don’t know that there was anything they weren’t involved in,” Mary Lynn said. Their father was a printer, and he assembled parish bulletins. And that was on top of his leadership of the Holy Name Society and the Blessed Sacrament Cub Scout pack. They have many memories of their father taking photos at school carnivals, bazaars and other events.

“He’d be in here taking pictures, whether it was the bishop or confirmations or special occasions,” Mary Lynn recalled, “and mom was Altar and Rosary and choir. Oh, she was in the choir forever.”

“We couldn’t get away from our parents,” Bobby said with a smile. “There was somebody that was watching us do whatever we did, should or shouldn’t do.”

CONTINUING THE LEGACY

After she graduated from SUNY Potsdam in the early ’80s, Mary Lynn returned to Syracuse and began a job search. She stopped into the office at Blessed Sacrament School and offered to fill in as a substitute teacher whenever needed. But the principal had other ideas. “She said, ‘Our music teacher just moved to Florida two weeks ago. Do you want a job?’”

Thirty-seven years later, Mary Lynn continues to teach elementary general music to students, from the 3-year-old Tiny Eagles to sixth graders, three days a week. She plays organ for three weekend church masses and leads an adult choir, a youth ensemble and a children’s church choir, in addition to the Blessed Sacrament School choir. She teaches private piano lessons on Mondays and Tuesdays.

Does she ever go home?

“It can get kind of crazy for both our schedules, so I am here seven days a week, and very often Bobby’s here seven days a week,” she replied.

Bobby had planned to be a carpenter, having worked in the building industry in high school, but ended up running the family photography business. At a turning point, when the advent of digital photography dramatically changed the business, three job offers came to him. Two were seasonal only, but with a family to support, he needed something year-round. The Blessed Sacrament job fit the bill, and he joined his sister as an employee there.

Bobby supervises a small staff who cares for the church, school, rectory, parish hall and convent. His days begin at 5:30 a.m. and, along with his team, he cleans, does indoor and outdoor maintenance and sets up for the many parish hall events.

SIBLINGS IN THE WORKPLACE

Brother and sister agree that it’s nice to be near each other at work and to share family news and events face-to-face. The way it looks now, there will be plenty of Decker-related involvement at Blessed Sacrament for years to come. Four of Bobby’s five grandchildren are students there, and Mary Lynn’s granddaughter will begin when she’s old enough. A niece sings in the church choir.

“We’re very fortunate,” Bobby said, and Mary Lynn agreed. “We’ve been here and are still here, solidly strong,” she said.

Christy Perry Tuohy is an author, journalist and writer based in Syracuse, New York.
Technology Integration Specialist Helps Schools Maximize Digital Resources

BY CHRISTY PERRY TUOHEY

Preschoolers at Holy Family School in Fairmount move robots resembling little bees around to learn vowel sounds or solve math problems. Fifth graders at Holy Cross School have just finished a Digital Citizenship curriculum that shows them how to navigate social media safely. Students at St. Patrick’s School in Oneida and Rome Catholic School have learned how to program drones, not unlike NASA team members who plan to remotely control drones on Mars.

With so much technology being taught in the Roman Catholic Diocese of Syracuse classrooms, clubs and camps, teachers need to constantly update their STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) skills. That’s where Rebecca Edsall comes in.

Edsall is a technology integration specialist for the Central New York Regional Information Center, which falls under the direction of the Onondaga-Cortland-Madison Board of Cooperative Educational Services, better known as OCM BOCES. She works with the Syracuse Diocese’s Catholic schools as an advisor and teacher.

Or, to put it more simply, “I tell people that I’m a tech coach, and that seems to make more sense in their minds,” she said. “My job is to support teachers with technology in the classroom. It’s my job to bring some expertise to them.”

Edsall visits diocesan schools, consults with faculty and staff and teaches students. She makes herself available to chat with all teachers, not just those teaching science, about technology resources they can use in their lessons.

“A band teacher had a phenomenal idea to use a website,” Edsall explained. “She wants to use screen tech to help kids over the summer, show them the fingerings and play the sound, and they can tune their instruments to the sound.”

Edsall started her job in November 2018. One of the initiatives she supported in fall 2019 with fifth graders at DeWitt’s Holy Cross School was Google’s Digital Citizenship curriculum, a five-unit lesson plan that teaches students how to think critically and seek out true facts on the internet and social media, stay safe from phishing and scams and manage their online reputations.

“There are so many places out there that are a danger for our kids, and they need to know how to balance their time online, to navigate safely, what to share and whom to share with,” she said.

Hands-on technology often comes into play when Edsall visits classrooms. St. Mary’s Academy in Baldwinsville and Holy Family School in Fairmount both use Bee-Bots. “They’re really cool because the littlest kids can use them,” she said. The plastic bees have buttons that children use to move them left, right, up or down on a mat. They fit in small pre-
schoolers’ hands, helping them solve math problems or spell words.

Robots, drones and drag-and-drop coding software are all tools Edsall employs to help with learning. She said, “If I’m really doing my job well, I know I’ve won when it integrates to the point where it’s more than just another tool, like a pencil or a book, but it reimagines learning in the classroom that makes the learning a little more authentic.”

Christy Perry Tuohey is an author, journalist and writer based in Syracuse, New York.
Notre Dame Names Football Field After Long-time Coach

BY KIRA MADDOX

A long-time coach and icon among Utica-area high school athletics enthusiasts experienced what he called one of the highlights of his career as his former employers gave him the ultimate dedication: naming a football field in his honor.

The Notre Dame Jr./Sr. High School field will now be known as the Coach Ben Rizzo Field. Rizzo started at the school in 1968 and went on to coach 11 seasons. During his tenure, two Notre Dame football teams went undefeated — in 1969 and 1973 — and the program notched three Central Oneida League championships and eight city championships. Rizzo also helped the Jugglers earn two Section III championships as an assistant head coach and offensive coordinator from 1981 to 1983.

“Everyone I spoke to about Coach Rizzo had nothing but good things to say,” said Kayla Hartman at the dedication ceremony. Hartman is Notre Dame’s director of development and was involved in putting the honor together. “I hear him talking with some of the guys around here and they start off with, ‘Hey, you probably don’t remember me,’ but they tell him their name, and he immediately says, ‘Of course I remember you! You played this position or ran that play.’ And it’s been 50 years — their faces have obviously changed a little. You can tell he’s someone who’s invested in his players.”

It was the players who were instrumental in getting the field dedicated to their beloved coach, Hartman said. While reaching out to gather interest in a reunion to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the 1969 undefeated season, an alum pitched the idea of naming the field after Rizzo. Buzz soon grew among other alumni, who were in agreement. Hartman put the proposal through to the school board. The school board voted unanimously to pass the act.

Along with more than 70 alumni, Rizzo was the special guest at the reunion and dedication ceremony, held Sept. 13 at the high school during a matchup against Tully. He fielded questions and reminisced with his old players.

“Tears started running, yes they did,” he said. Rizzo, who is also a member of the Greater Utica Sports Hall of Fame and Notre Dame’s Athletic Hall of Fame, thanked his Notre Dame family, the school board, the Diocese of Syracuse, the faculty and his ballplayers for giving him this experience. Each team over the years was unique in its own way, he said, and all hold special memories that could not be compared.

Kira Maddox is a freelance writer/editor based in Utica, New York, with experience covering the greater Central New York area. She can be reached at kmaddox94@gmail.com.
Sewing at St. Patrick’s in Oneida

Fifth graders at St. Patrick’s School in Oneida perfected their sewing skills this Advent season by making pocket hand warmers to sell at the school’s Christmas Fair. The money raised at the fair was donated to the Samaritan Purse Christmas Mission, a Christian charity “that shares the eternal hope and peace found only in Jesus with men, women and children who are victims of war, poverty, disaster, disease and famine.” The organization supports people in more than 100 countries, including the U.S., where the organization assists wounded soldiers and their spouses, as well as those devastated by natural disasters.

Give Some PJs, Get a Book

St. Rose of Lima School in North Syracuse held one of its many service projects for the academic year by participating in the Scholastic Books Pajama Drive. In the weeks leading up to Christmas, students donated 203 pairs of pajamas to give to needy children, most of whom are waiting to be adopted. For every pair donated, Scholastic Books gave a book to a child in need, as well. “We’re always looking for ways to promote literacy,” said Principal Mary Crysler, “and that got us thinking about ways we could pass that on to others in the community.” Since 2001, the Scholastic Books Pajama Drive has donated over one million pajamas and books to underserved children in communities around the country.

Warming Hearts at St. Mary’s Academy

Each Christmas the students of St. Mary’s Academy in Baldwinsville collect items to gift to the residents of Syracuse Home at McHarrie Place, a local residential long-term care facility. This year the students decided they wanted to make the gifts. The students used their recess time to assemble beautiful hand made fleece blankets, which were presented to each of the residents during a holiday visit.
Running Clubs Exercise Body and Soul

BY CAROLINE K. REFF

Everyone knows that exercise is good for the body, but it’s good for the mind and soul, too. Students and faculty at St. Mary’s School in Cortland and Holy Family School in Fairmount have seen the benefits firsthand, as both schools have running clubs that promote physical fitness, emotional well-being and character building.

Girls on the Run Promotes Self-Esteem at St. Mary’s

St. Mary’s offers a program based on Girls on the Run (www.girlsontherun.org), a national nonprofit that “works to encourage pre-teen girls to develop self-respect and healthy lifestyles through dynamic, interactive lessons and running games.” This 10-week program for Third to Sixth Grade girls is under the direction of Second Grade teacher Theresa Smith and Fourth Grade teacher Marisa Gobel, who both enjoy running themselves.

Girls on the Run begins each spring at St. Mary’s in anticipation of a 5K at the end of the school year. “Most of the girls think they’ll never be able to run that far, but, by the end of the year, that sense of accomplishment is just great to see,” said Smith. “It gives them goals and helps build self-esteem.”

The program is not just about running, however. Girls on the Run also focuses on lessons about health, conflict management, peer pressure and other issues girls in their tween years are navigating. The group also coordinates service projects to help learn skills like cooperation, according to Smith. “We work our Catholic values into the activities we do during the Girls on the Run meetings,” said Smith. “That’s an important element of our activities.”

At the end of each meeting, however, there is plenty of running. This, too, may be tied into the day’s conversation, Smith said. “For example, the girls might run a certain distance and then finish by saying something positive about themselves that works to promote their self-esteem,” Gobel added.

At the end of the school year, the girls participate in one of the communities 5K runs, although in the spring of 2020, the national Girls on the Run organization is holding its own 5K for area schools at Onondaga Community College. Each student participates in the 5K with an adult running buddy — a parent, coach, teacher or adult friends — who encourages them and supports them through the race. Whether they walk or run across the finish line doesn’t really matter. The real reward is the lessons learned along the way.

Off to a Running Start at Holy Family

While Holy Family School’s running club is not quite as formal as St. Mary’s, it is just as effective. Under the guidance of Kindergarten teacher Christine Isbell and Physical Education teacher Kevin Hoag, students — both boys and girls in Kindergarten through Grade 6 — come in at 7 a.m., before school starts, for a half-hour session held in the gymnasium.

“We decided a morning club would be a good way to help the kids release their energy,” said Isbell, who is an avid runner and last fall completed the Marine Corps. Marathon in Washington, D.C.

The club begins meeting around Thanksgiving and lasts through the end of May. Often, the younger children buddy-up with some of the older students as a means of encouragement. Twenty five laps around the gym equals one mile, and the students are eager to watch their progress add up. They keep track using popsicle sticks — one for each lap — which they can trade up for rubber bands or a small sneaker-shaped trinket and, eventually, when they complete 13 miles, a larger plastic sneaker that can hang on their backpack as a display of their accomplishments. At the end of the year, students receive a certificate of achievement for their accomplishments.
Those students who can’t attend the morning session have the option to work with Hoag during gym classes to complete their running goals.

While no formal 5K is in place for the end of the school year, some of the children participate with their families in community activities like the Good Samaritan Run, which raises money for Christian Health Services of Syracuse, and Paint Westvale Purple, which supports a number of local nonprofits.

“Most of the girls think they’ll never be able to run that far, but, by the end of the year, that sense of accomplishment is just great to see. It gives them goals and helps build self-esteem.”

“I like the idea that kids are finding something that they like to do,” said Isbell. “It keeps them active, and running is a self-motivating thing, as you work to beat your own record. Best of all, it’s forming good habits for life!”

Caroline K. Reff is the editor of Pillars magazine and a freelance writer in Syracuse, New York. She is also an instructor at the S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications at Syracuse University.

**Ludden Joins IB Program**

Bishop Ludden Jr./Sr. High School recently announced that it will begin offering an International Baccalaureate program to its students in the fall of 2020. The program allows students to earn college credits during high school and often gives them an edge when applying to colleges, according to Leo Cosgrove, principal. Ludden is the only Catholic school in the area to offer the IB program and is one of only 71 schools (private, Catholic or public) in the state.

For more information, go to: www.bishopludden.org or www.ibp.org.
Ludden Alums Have A Knack for A New York State Fair Snack

BY CHRISTY PERRY TUOHEY

Could there be something about the Bishop Ludden school cafeteria that inspires its students to become chefs? It’s an interesting question because, as it turns out, multiple alumni of the junior-senior high school own and/or work for food stands located at the Great New York State Fair.

According to Bishop Ludden Assistant Director of Development Emily Wheeler, at least a half-dozen former Ludden students operate food stands at the fair each year. Danny D’s on Restaurant Row is owned and operated by Dan DeRose, ’71, and his daughter Jamie DeRose Norris, ’94, works the back bar.

Jamie says Danny D’s is a family affair, as well. “My dad’s oldest sister, my Aunt Cindy, is on the stove, cooking,” she said. “My mom is there from open to close every day, waiting on people, keeping us staffed and doing anything and everything to make things work. My brothers, Ben and Danny, Jr., take time off every year to be able to do whatever it takes to have fun and get the job done, too!”

According to Jamie’s mom, Kathy DeRose, Danny D’s started out as Tony’s Fine Food in 1984, run by Dan’s father, Tony. “All of his children, Cindy Smith, Tony DeRose, Jr., Class of ’69; Dan, Class of ’71; and Kathy, Class of ’78, worked there, along with their spouses,” Kathy said. “In 2010, Dan took over the stand, and it became Danny D’s.”

The DeRose family has owned the food stand for 35 years, and they plan on being in the same location, outside the Coliseum on Restaurant Row, at the 2020 New York State Fair.

A pair of Ludden alums, Tom Whelan, ’79, and Pete Holmes, ’82, run Whelan’s Pub at the fair, a spin-off from Whelan’s previous restaurant venture, Whelan’s Pub at Split Rock on Onondaga Hill.

Whelan and Holmes both moved away from New York after college, and pub owner Whelan found that operating a Syracuse-based restaurant from Connecticut 365 days a year was not sustainable long-term.

“That is when the opportunity came along in 2007 to run a full-service concession at the Great New York State Fair,” Whelan said. The two now
serve up food and drink at Whelan’s 12
days a year, between Restaurant Row and
Iroquois Street near the Carriage
Museum.

Whelan says they were influenced
to sell food at the fair by another Ludden
alum, Jim Bova, who, along with his
father, Dede, has been involved in fair
food service since the 1980s. Whelan’s
Pub at the fair draws many other of the
school’s former students at special
events. “We try to have a ‘Bishop Ludden
Day at the Fair’ once a year, sometimes
twice, and it usually draws many alumni
getting together to share some great
stories, have a beer and raise some
money for Bishop Ludden,” he said.

In addition to the DeRoses,
Whelan and Holmes, there are even
more Ludden graduates serving fair
food each year. According to Wheeler,
Carr’s Cove, located in the Horticulture
Building, is run by Kevin Mahoney, ’86,
and Ireland at the Fair, in the same
location, is run by Shelly Mahoney, ’78.

So next time you nosh at the
fairgrounds, you may well be tasting the
handiwork of a Bishop Ludden alumnus.

Christy Perry Tuohy is an author, journalist
and writer based in Syracuse, New York.

Holy Cross
Crusaders at
Ronald McDonald
House

The Holy Cross Caring
Crusaders Club, made up
of fifth and sixth graders
at Holy Cross School in Dewitt,
cooked and served breakfast for
families staying at the Syracuse
Ronald McDonald House while
their children are receiving medi-
cal treatment at area hospitals.
The group is in its second year
after students and parents
wanted to plan some projects
that would help do good works in
the community. Since the group’s
inception, the members have
raked leaves for elderly neighbors
near the school, delivered cookies
and thank you cards to the local
firehouses and picked vegetables
at Mathew 25 Farm.
Mandarin Classes Flourish in Southern Tier Schools

BY DYANN NASHTON

A Chinese quote reads, “Knowledge of languages is the doorway to wisdom.” If that is the case, there are some wizened young people in the Catholic Schools of Broome County. And, they may actually understand the translation, thanks to a program that brings Mandarin language classes to them.

The program, offered with the help of the Confucius Institute at SUNY Binghamton, complements an already successful, existing foreign language program. Zu-Yan Chen, SUNY distinguished teaching professor and director of the Confucius Institute of Chinese Opera, described a program focused on the future.

“The goal of our Confucius Institute is to make the Catholic Schools of Broome County’s Mandarin Program a long-term and sustainable program. We will also try to provide more teachers down the road, so students will have the opportunity to be exposed to Chinese culture in the class and beyond,” he said.

Sustainability, not only keeps it in motion but ultimately best serves the students. “So students starting from Third Grade can keep studying throughout their years in middle and high school and can gain a solid foundation before entering college,” Chen added.

One teacher rotates to the Southern Tier’s Catholic elementary schools, and another, Lu Yan, works at Seton Catholic Central School. Seton Principal Matthew Martinkovic said, “The Mandarin program has given students a chance to broaden their minds to another language and culture.”

Teacher Jennifer Zhang spends two days per six-day cycle per school with elementary students at St. James in Johnson City, All Saints in Endicott and St. John the Evangelist in Binghamton. After teaching two years in Thailand, she said teaching Mandarin to English-speaking students in the United States initially proved challenging. The Chinese population in the area is small, and students do not get an opportunity to practice what they learn outside of the classroom or get a fully immersive experience.

This complicates retention of knowledge, she explained. “Especially for the younger children. It is difficult for them to remember what they’ve learned. If they don’t use Mandarin a lot, they may never really know it.”

Yet, Zhang said she has adapted how she teaches the subject to account for this by encouraging the students to take notes to reinforce the lessons. St. James’ Principal Suzy Kitchen said Zhang incorporates culture in the classes by talking about festivals and the Chinese New Year. Games are played as a teaching strategy, too.

Zhang said her students are eager to share what they learn in class with their families. “For me, I think
“Mandarin classes expose them to another language and culture so they can appreciate everyone. You have to learn to get along with anyone, and it helps if you can speak a few words in their language.”

it’s amazing. Because if they are interested, they can learn things that are difficult or new,” she said.

Classes have created word books about types of transportation, fruit, vegetables and even created menus, said Zhang. Kitchen said Zhang has taken Fourth through Sixth Grade students to a tea house across from St. James where the children ask for bubble tea in Mandarin, and Yan made dumplings with students two years in a row.

“Our current fifth graders are super focused on Mandarin right now,” Kitchen said. St. James is also starting an extracurricular foreign language club, as well, which helps accommodate students who miss the class due to other learning needs.

Kitchen said, “Mandarin classes expose them to another language and culture so they can appreciate everyone. You have to learn to get along with anyone, and it helps if you can speak a few words in their language.”

St. John the Evangelist School Principal James Fountaine said the Confucius Institute has also fostered other relationships with SUNY Binghamton and invites students and their families to cultural celebrations. He said the Mandarin classes were introduced four years ago. Fountaine lauds the school board and former Principal Richard Bucci for sharing the vision with the community that Catholic schools could provide things that may not exist in other schools. From early in the program, the community embraced the new teachers and helped them acclimate to the area.

Zhang said she finds the Catholic schools an ideal climate for learning. She noted, “I love the kids here. Because they believe in Jesus, they are very good and hard working. Some are very good at Mandarin, and they help the others, which is good for all the children. They help each other... We have to be very patient with young children, and we need to love the kids first.”

Dyann Nashton is a freelance writer based in Oneida, New York. She is a frequent contributor to The Catholic Sun.
Advent Is About Community Giving at Notre Dame Elementary

BY CAROLINE K. REFF

When the holiday season approaches, young children everywhere start making lists of gifts they hope to find under the tree on Christmas morning. Certainly, the students at Notre Dame Elementary in Utica do so, too, but at the same time they are learning to prepare for Christmas through special school traditions that emphasize the meaning of Advent.

Notre Dame’s long-standing tradition involves a weekly Advent prayer service, a beautifully decorated 10-foot tall Christmas tree and hundreds and hundreds of brand new hats, mittens and scarves collected for those in the community who are in need. The service is coordinated by Bernadette Verna, who retired after decades of teaching Sixth Grade in various diocesan schools and now is the remedial reading and writing teacher at Notre Dame.

“We want our children to remember that Advent is a time of preparation, and during this time we need to be especially kind and generous to our neighbors,” said Verna, who noted that there is a significant underserved population in the community, including a large number of immigrants. “During our prayer service, students light the candles on the Advent wreath, place figures in the manger scene and learn more about the school’s mission — especially the giving part — and it’s something all of our children, from Pre-K to Sixth Grade, can take a part in. It’s just a lovely, lovely part of our school year.”

During the service, children can bring donated items to be placed in colorfully decorated Christmas boxes and, in turn, receive an ornament to represent each donation. Students are always excited to walk across the stage and place their ornaments on the giant Christmas tree, which becomes more and more brilliant as the weeks go by. They are even more thrilled to hear the weekly tally as donations come in from the school’s generous families. (Last year, the school collected over 1,200 items!)

The donated items are delivered to St. John’s Parish in Utica, where Sister Paula Mayer and a group of volunteers run an outreach program that
“During our prayer service, students light the candles on the Advent wreath, place figures in the manger scene and learn more about the school’s mission — especially the giving part — and it’s something all of our children, from Pre-K to Sixth Grade, can take a part in. It’s just a lovely, lovely part of our school year.”

includes a food pantry, clothing store, summer bible school and transitional housing for refugees. At Christmas time, the outreach program sponsors a party for needy families served by the parish, and many of the hats, gloves and scarves donated by Notre Dame students are distributed at that time.

“It’s wonderful to see children giving to other children, especially as they come to realize that some of these items are going to those right in our own community. They look forward to the act of giving, and we, at Notre Dame, are very humbled that we can be a part of this,” said Rossi. “When we serve others, we are really serving Jesus, and we try to remind the children every day about being kind and having empathy for others.”

Caroline K. Reff is the editor of Pillars magazine and a freelance writer in Syracuse, New York. She is also an instructor at the S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications at Syracuse University.

Notre Dame Voted Best Local Elementary School

Congratulations to Notre Dame Elementary School for being selected as the “Best Local Elementary School” in the 2019 “Best of the “Best” contest sponsored by the Utica Observer Dispatch. The newspaper runs this annual contest asking for nominations in categories that include schools, restaurants, places to work, etc. In the past, Notre Dame has been awarded the second or third spot, but in 2019, the school was voted No. 1! “We are very humbled but not surprised because of the efforts of our faculty, staff and parents, as well as everything that comes together as a community to make Notre Dame Elementary outstanding,” said Principal Mary Rossi. “We are displaying our plaque very proudly here. It’s not something we take lightly. We have a real sense of family at this school, and we’re proud that it has been recognized by our community.”
DEBRA BRILLANTE: BISHOP GRIMES JR./SR. HIGH SCHOOL, EAST SYRACUSE

Bishop Grimes Jr./Sr. High School Principal Debra Brillante says she has always wanted to be an educator, and that “working in Catholic schools has provided me with opportunities to share my faith, openly and passionately, so that I could be authentically who God created me to be. I have been blessed to teach and lead in places where I have always felt surrounded by the holy presence of God.”

Brillante takes the helm at Grimes after serving most recently as assistant principal for academics at Christian Brothers Academy. She began her career in education as a teacher at St. John the Baptist Academy, going on to serve as principal at St. Mary's Academy in Baldwinsville, assistant superintendent for the Diocese of Syracuse, and superintendent of Elementary Schools (K-8) for the Archdiocese of Philadelphia.

WILLIAM BRYAN: MOST HOLY ROSARY SCHOOL, SYRACUSE

William Bryan

During his long and varied career in education, Most Holy Rosary School Principal William Bryan has specialized in serving students, in his new post at Rosary, he is continuing to do just that.

Before joining Rosary, Bryan served as associate vice president of student development at Onondaga Community College. He previously served at Penn State Worthington Scranton as director of student and enrollment services, Minnesota West Community College and Nassau Community College as dean of students, Lindsey Wilson College and Pratt Community College as dean of student services, Garden City Community College as director of admissions, college coordinator/assistant director of admissions, and director of residence life; and St. Mary Elementary/Jr. High School as principal.

One of Bryan’s first initiatives at Rosary is a study of the school’s religion curriculum. Teachers at the school approached him and expressed a desire to review the current curriculum and explore other options, he explained. Several programs were researched and are now being piloted at the school. This spring, the teachers will submit and evaluate their findings with the help of a developed assessment tool. From there, a recommendation will be presented to the pastor and the Catholic Schools Office, Bryan said.

But the results are already in on some key indicators: Students are happy and engaged, Bryan said, and new teachers have come on board who are fitting in well. There’s “a great relationship between the kids and the staff,” he added.

LISA COPPOLA: BLESSED SACRAMENT SCHOOL, SYRACUSE

Lisa Coppola

Blessed Sacrament School Principal Lisa Coppola has devoted a quarter of a century to the school, serving 13 years as a First Grade teacher and 11 years as a parent volunteer prior to taking on the role of principal.

Her career in Catholic education began at The Gingerbread House Preschool in Syracuse, a ministry founded by the Sisters of St. Francis. “I loved being in an environment that was filled with God. I decided to apply to the Catholic Diocese,” Coppola said. “I walked through the Blessed Sacrament School doors, and I fell in love with the school. I knew this is where I belonged.”

Coppola’s first months as principal have been busy ones as the school undertake a Year of Service. By early November, the school had already collected 1,000 pair of socks for In My Father’s Kitchen, supplies for Helping Hounds, and, in partnership with Bishop Grimes Jr./Sr. High School, personal items for Divina Provendencia, she said, as well as the school’s 20th year of pumpkin-pie-making to benefit the Rescue Mission’s annual Thanksgiving dinner. “It was a tradition I started 20 years ago when I was the first grade teacher at Blessed Sacrament,” she said.

Coppola will also continue another Blessed Sacrament legacy: the principal’s reading challenge instituted by her predecessor, Andrea Polcaro, who served 32 years as principal. When students met their year-long reading challenge, Polcaro would give them a wacky reward — everything from watching her eat a worm sandwich to allowing them to crack eggs on her head. Coppola promises that “if the students read 15,000 books this year, I will be dunked in a dunk tank.”

Even with that prospect on the horizon, Coppola said she is “so very blessed to have been given this opportunity. “It has been my dream horizon, Coppola said she is “so

NANCY FERRARONE: IMMACULATE CONCEPTION SCHOOL, FAYETTEVILLE

Immaculate Conception Principal Nancy Ferrarone spent the first weeks of her tenure acclimating to her new post and the school’s culture, and to the uniqueness of Catholic education.

“It’s opened up my eyes…. I really do appreciate the Catholic educational experience,” she said. “I think it empowers children. I think there’s a strong community that’s supported by staff, parents, the church and even other kids … There is a commitment by all.”

Before coming to IC, Ferrarone taught in Rochester City Schools and Fairport Central Schools and served in administration at Brewster Central Schools and Spackenkill Union Free School District.
Ferrarone is diving into work on marketing efforts and grant applications, along with familiarizing herself with the students and curriculum. She’s also conducting observations with the school staff, “getting to know them personally and also learning their instructional craft,” and working with them on opportunities for development and learning best practices, she said.

This year, Ferrarone’s focus will be on developing collaborative relationships with the other diocesan schools and, overall, exploring “ways we can improve — both academically and the environment within the school,” she said.

DONALD MILLS: CATHOLIC SCHOOLS OFFICE, SYRACUSE

Assistant Superintendent Donald Mills has hit the ground running in his new position in the Catholic Schools Office. “Things are going great so far this year. I am really excited to be working on several initiatives for our schools,” he said.

Mills most recently served two years as principal of Immaculate Conception School in Fayetteville. Prior to that, he served as principal of Immaculate Conception School in Ithaca, Ithaca High School and Niagara Wheatfield High School; assistant principal at Williamsville South High School; and as a science teacher at Cumberland Regional High School in Seabrook, New Jersey, where he was nationally recognized as the runner-up for the Presidential Award for Excellence in Science and Mathematics Teaching, as well as a recipient of the Access Excellence Fellowship.

As he took on his new role this fall, Mills said he was most looking forward to helping every school be the best Catholic school it can be. He outlined several resources he has since created to do just that: a curriculum and instruction drive allows teachers and principals to electronically access diocesan and state curriculum and instruction-related resources; a lesson exchange serves as a library where teachers can find and exchange best-practice lessons; and a new principals connections group connects new administrators to network, ask questions, and receive assistance on items that may be new to them.

Mills has also created a process to ‘streamline schools’ NYS Mandated Services Aid applications, as well as helpful guides for other types of New York State Education Department aid schools can apply for,” he said. Additionally, Mills serves as the diocesan representative for the Student and Exchange Visitor Program, which allows international students to attend Catholic schools.

Mills said he “became an educator to help all children to learn, especially in the area of the biological sciences, which is a passion of mine” and chose Catholic education “to work in an environment where I can also live my faith and be a positive influence on the faith and learning environment of the school.”

WILLIAM PIPHER: ALL SAINTS CATHOLIC SCHOOL, ENDICOTT

All Saints Catholic School Principal William Pipher says he chose to become an educator because “working in education represents the most fitting, rewarding, and important challenge that I can think of.” He chose to teach in a Catholic school because “there is such a wonderful atmosphere of community, giving and spirituality in the Catholic schools. It is a great feeling to walk through the doors every day.”

Pipher has been walking through the doors of All Saints for eight years now, having taught in Grades 2-6 at the school for seven years before assuming his current role. Pipher graduated from York College of Pennsylvania with an MBA and holds a master’s degree in childhood education from Binghamton University. He is currently working toward a Certificate of Advanced Studies in School Building Leadership at Le Moyne College.

TINA SEYMOUR: CATHEDRAL ACADEMY AT POMPEI, SYRACUSE

Cathedral Academy at Pompei Principal Tina Seymour has served on just about every rung of the teaching ladder at CAP, from student teacher to Fourth Grade teacher to art teacher to mentor to principal intern. Now, as principal, borrowing a phrase from her predecessor Sister Helen Ann Charlebois, she believes “I am where I am supposed to be. I have taken many different paths in my life, and the day I stepped foot in Cathedral Academy at Pompei, there was a sense of peace and purpose.”

CAP is home to a student body whose families hail from five continents and 19 nations, and most of the students speak and understand two or more languages. Seymour celebrates the school’s diversity and said she aims to address language barriers and “open the doors of communication with our families and community.”

Katherine Long is the editor of The Catholic Sun, the news media of the Diocese of Syracuse. Some portions of the profiles here were first published in the Sept. 12, 2019, edition of The Catholic Sun.
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