Dear Friends,

Everyday our youth are challenged to discover the world within. What an awesome challenge is presented to them as they walk the halls of our Catholic institutions into rooms of dedicated teachers who explore with them faith and knowledge of the world. Thus, the challenge and privilege summons our teachers to be ministers, mentors and proclaimers of that integrated “world within.”

In this issue of “Pillars,” we celebrate our teachers, who each day assist our youth to explore their gifts and challenge them to share these gifts with those yet to discover the world within. And, we share with you other stories of our success found in our students, families, programs and, of course, our faith.

It has been my privilege to serve as interim superintendent these past seven months. I know you will welcome and support the new superintendent, Mr. William Crist. God Bless you and your loved ones.

Sincerely yours in Christ,

Msgr. George F. Sheehan
Interim Superintendent
MEET THE SUPERINTENDENT:

William W. Crist

BY CAROLINE K. REFF

In March 2014, the Catholic Schools of the Diocese of Syracuse will welcome a new leader, as William W. Crist takes over as superintendent of schools. A graduate of Ithaca College, Crist brings with him 31 years of experience in education — from classroom teacher to superintendent of schools for the Oswego City School District.

Raised Catholic in Oswego, NY, Crist has been married to his childhood sweetheart, Carol, for 30 years. The couple has two children, Emily, a recent graduate of Le Moyne College; and Billy, a student at SUNY IT.

Crist will join the Catholic Schools Office this spring after completing his commitment as interim superintendent of the Massena Central School District in northern New York. As he prepares to take on his new role with the Catholic schools, he shared some of the philosophies and goals he brings to his new role as superintendent of Catholic schools.

You’ve spent your career in public school education. What sparked your transition to Catholic education?

I really do believe things happen for a reason. I was raised Catholic, but I never attended Catholic school. I’m public school educated, and I’ve been working in public schools all my life. When I heard that the diocese was looking for a new superintendent, I was intrigued — but the timing was not good. I took a chance though, and I’m happy to say it worked out. It’s interesting to me to have the opportunity to bring my expertise as an educator together with my Catholic faith.

What goals do you intend to bring to the 22 schools in our diocese?

I’m looking forward to better understanding the priorities of Bishop Cunningham and all of those who are essential to making the schools a great success. I can’t wait to work with individual schools to better understand their values and listen to what each thinks it needs to be successful. I want to make sure our Catholic education system is properly funded, not only in classroom resources, but in professional development and the ability to attract and retain quality teachers in our schools. I hope to pursue further relationships with higher education, particularly Le Moyne College, in order to ensure that our students can make a successful transition to college and have the opportunity to further their education in the faith. And, I want to continue to promote Catholic education as a great value and show how it enhances the lives of student and the families.

What do you consider some of the vital elements of a successful education system?

I am a strong believer in the common core and being competitive as a nation. It’s key to preparing our children to be strong people in a strong society. Students need to be prepared not just for meeting the requirements of a certain grade level, but for life — through a strong curriculum that is grounded in character building and the teachings of the Catholic faith. We need to be sure students are in an environment that allows them to successfully interact and have positive relationships with their teachers. And, we need to foster a greater sense of community and a real sense of pride in our schools.

Do you have a particular philosophy with which you approach your job?

I have a joy in seeing people succeed. I hope to be out in the diocese and visible at all of our schools witnessing this success and collaborating with principals, teachers and families to promote even greater levels of success. I like providing resources and access to our teachers and principals so they can do their own things, make their own decisions — and I’m fine with allowing people to learn from their mistakes. I like to say, ‘Erasers are good things to have on pencils,’ as long as you’re learning from the mistakes. It helps us all grow.

I certainly don’t intend to come in and try to reinvent Catholic education. There’s a great model and a lot to be very proud of as a system, as is evident in the 22 outstanding schools we have here in the diocese and the wide reaching pool of alumni who are proof that Catholic schools work. I want to partner with others within the diocese to show what a great value Catholic education brings to students, families and our community. And, of course, I want to ensure that our students are getting the very best education possible — based on strong academics and a vibrant community of faith.

Caroline K. Reff is a freelance writer in Syracuse, NY, and editor of Pillars magazine.
Trinity Produces 2013 Valedictorian and Salutatorian

CATHOLIC SCHOOL FOUNDATION LEADS TO ACADEMIC SUCCESS

BY PAT SHEA

It’s the age-old question of nature vs. nurture: does having a Catholic school education, even if it’s only during the elementary school years, better prepare a young student for a more successful academic future? Judging by college freshmen Sarah Mancuso and Madeline Galvin, that answer would be yes.

Mancuso and Galvin met 13 years ago as 5 year olds attending kindergarten class at Trinity Catholic School in Oswego, NY. The girls immediately became best friends and were inseparable, despite Mancuso being a native of Oswego and Galvin making the daily trip from Mexico, N.Y.

Throughout grades K-6, both girls shined academically at Trinity. Following their 6th grade graduation, without a Catholic middle school nearby, the girls were enrolled in public middle schools in their respective towns, forcing them to leave their friendship and Catholic education behind.

“It would have been great if I could have kept going to a Catholic school after Trinity, but there weren’t any middle schools in Oswego,” explained Mancuso.

Just prior to Mancuso’s and Galvin’s June 2013 high school graduations, Trinity Catholic School Principal Barb Sugar was informed that Mancuso had been selected as Oswego High School's 2013 salutatorian, and Galvin had been chosen as 2013 valedictorian for Mexico Central High School.

Sugar was delighted that two former Trinity students had received such high honors in their high school academic careers and invited both girls to return to Trinity this past June to receive recognition awards for academic excellence.

“They [Mancuso and Galvin] both had such a love of learning while they were here at Trinity. I wasn’t surprised to hear they had been selected as valedictorian and salutatorian,” stated Sugar. “At Trinity, we believe every student should be able to work up to their potential and we [teachers] accept that potential is different for each child. Sarah and Madeline always excelled.”

In reminiscing about Mancuso and Galvin, Sugar believes the academic foundation Trinity Catholic School provided helped both young women develop important skills for a successful academic future.

“When our students leave the 6th grade they are so prepared for middle school compared to what the other students have faced,” said Sugar. “Our students often come back and tell me that middle school was a ‘piece of cake,’ because of all the preparation we did with them.”

Both Mancuso and Galvin agreed that Trinity’s curriculum and teaching methods helped develop skills they still rely on today at college.

“At Trinity, we focused on writing, math and developing good study habits. We were in 2nd grade and putting on presentations I think some of my college classmates might have difficulty doing today,” said Galvin. “Learning these skills at Trinity put me at a definite advantage in middle school, high school and now college.”

Mancuso agreed. “Trinity also wouldn’t tolerate students who didn’t do their homework, which set up a good process for me,” explained Mancuso. “If it wasn’t allowed in elementary school, I just assumed it wouldn’t be allowed in middle or high school, and I took it upon myself to always do the homework. Even now in college if it’s not required or checked it doesn’t matter, I still do all the homework and start the year off on the right foot.”

How else did Catholic school help Galvin and Mancuso? “I think my character was structured by a Catholic school environment,” explained Galvin. “My experience there helped me learn to always open up to new ideas, and I feel it helped me develop a morally good character.”

For Mancuso, Catholic school taught her to always rise to a challenge, even if it seemed overwhelming at first. “The biggest change from Trinity to public middle school was the size,” said Mancuso.
“Trinity had approximately 100 students in the entire school, and at my middle school we had over 350 students in my class alone, and over 700 in the school.”

Mancuso also felt Trinity gave both her and Galvin an edge. “Teachers at my middle school always told me they could pick out which were the students from Trinity immediately because those students had great manners and were disciplined in their study habits,” she said.

When Mancuso and Galvin returned to Trinity in June, Sugar was impressed not only with their intelligence but with their poise. “I occasionally get the chance to see Sarah because her family goes to my church, but I hadn’t seen Madeline in years until she came for the recognition award,” said Sugar. “When I saw [Mancuso and Galvin] together again at Trinity, what I saw were two very mature young ladies, ready and excited to begin college.”

Since their meeting in June, Galvin has gone on to attend Rochester Institute of Technology (R.I.T) and is studying for a career in engineering. “I love being here,” stated Galvin in a phone interview from the campus of R.I.T. “I’ve been meeting a lot of interesting people, and I’m exploring different types of engineering. Next year I will decide on what type of engineering I want to focus on.”

Mancuso, a freshman at SUNY Geneseo who is planning to go into the health field, is also enjoying college life. “I really like Geneseo and I like the classes in my major, biology and chemistry,” she said.

Mancuso recently traveled to Oswego to visit her family and found it interesting that her parents were still helping out at fundraisers at Trinity. “That’s another interesting thing about Catholic school,” stated Mancuso. “Families get to know other families and they become friends. If there’s an event that my parents can help out at, even though I don’t attend the school anymore, they just go.”

As college freshmen, Mancuso and Galvin are busy now with classes, but Mancuso did have a few words of wisdom for Oswego High School’s 2014 salutatorian: “Keep working hard after high school. It might seem like the title of salutatorian or valedictorian should be the end point, but, in truth, it’s a midway point. It’s important to keep up on the work and know there’s more ahead of you than behind you,” she said.

Pat Shea is the associate editor of The Catholic Sun.
A New Sense of Bliss at Rome Catholic School

BY DYANN NASHTON

Sometimes it is not a matter of whether or not the glass is half empty or half full. Sometimes you just need a different glass. At least, that is the way Patricia Bliss sees it. Bliss assumed leadership as principal of Rome Catholic School last fall.

Bliss’ career history traces her years spent as a classroom teacher in 6th, 7th and 8th grade math and technology through times when she served as vice principal and principal. She has been an educator in both New York State and New Jersey, earning the Outstanding Educator Award in 1994 from the Archdiocese of Newark. Currently a resident of Cooperstown, NY, Bliss spent part of her career in the Cooperstown and Oneonta areas in both Catholic and public schools. But no matter where her career took her, she has followed the changes in Central New York’s Catholic education.

Bliss came to Rome Catholic (RCS) knowing full well the challenges that she would face. This is the first year that junior and senior high school level education is not offered in the building. However, the school continues to thrive with students in pre-school through 6th grade.

Today there are 120 students in the North Rome building, including busy pre-school and pre-kindergarten classes. The legacy of RCS’ technology program continues with a strong robotics program and SmartBoards in nearly all of the classrooms. Bliss is working to make iPad technology available to RCS students in the near future. This year, Spanish was added to the curriculum for kindergarten through 6th grade with plans to introduce the language to the pre-K class later this year.

The territory Bliss encountered in Rome was not completely foreign to her. With 31 years in Catholic education, Bliss has experienced her fair share of mergers and closures and has seen it from all perspectives. “I’ve been involved, both as a teacher and as a principal, in schools that merged. I’ve seen it from both sides in a school that closed and in one that received students from another closed school,” she said.
She said she has noticed similar threads in these experiences and what she is learning about the RCS community. "I found the same situation here as we did there. The children accept it while the parents struggle with it." The faculty seems to land somewhere in the middle. She noted, "Teachers seem to have an easier time with it when they keep their focus on the children."

Bliss acknowledged that every situation is a little different and all circumstances require a degree of flexibility. She uses a saying borrowed from her father as a springboard to her philosophy: “Nothing is certain but death and taxes.”

Bliss said everyone is living and adjusting to a changing world that looks very different than it did decades ago when every parish had its own school. “In my mind, it’s all fluid,” she said.

“It’s not always about right or wrong, black or white. I don’t see things as the glass is half empty or half full,” she said, “Sometimes the glass is twice as big as it needs to be. So, you get a new glass.”

These kinds of challenges, Bliss described, are not reasons to give up but rather to look at things differently. In any given situation, she said, you do the best you can. “Sometimes we have to make the best decision we can at that particular time. If it turns out it wasn’t the best decision, we adjust,” she added.

“Things grow more complicated when there is a lack of trust,” she said, “It’s when people don’t have trust that the anger comes in.” Mindful of this concern while strengthening the elementary school, she is keenly aware and sensitive to the sadness in Rome with the loss of the junior/senior high classes.

Calling on the sense of realistic optimism she brings to her position and the little ones entrusted to her care, she said, “Whatever we do, we do for the mission and with that we’re always looking out for the best interest of the children.”

*Dyann Nashton is a freelance writer in Oneida, NY.*

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**Sister Act**

Holy Cross School in Dewitt is proud to team up with its sister school, Cathedral Academy at Pompei, to collect school supplies, sneakers and healthy snacks for needy students. Students at Holy Cross will continue to support CAP with “wish list” items throughout the year.

**Sensational Sandwiches**

Students are St. Margaret’s School in Mattydale participate in various community service projects throughout the school year. Above, students pack sandwiches for a local shelter.
TV Sports Career Keeps Ludden Grad in the Action

BY CHRISTY PERRY

When the red light on the studio camera flashes, it’s “go time” for WSYR-TV’s Sports Director Steve Infanti. It’s his signal that he’s live, on-air. It’s time to deliver the day’s sports stories to the people of Central New York.

Infanti says he gets that same “go time” feeling when he’s back at his high school alma mater, Bishop Ludden Junior/Senior High School, covering a basketball game for his station. Back in the 1990s, Infanti was a point guard for the Ludden Gaelic Knights.

“I’d go back to Ludden to cover games and the National Anthem would play and I’d get that adrenaline rush just like being an athlete,” Infanti remembered. “Even though I was on the sidelines with a camera, I’d get that rush.”

The 37-year-old father of two has reported and anchored for Syracuse’s News Channel 9 for the past 15 years. A graduate of Ludden and the Roy H. Park School of Communications at Ithaca College, he says he knew, even as a young boy, that he wanted to write and play sports. When he got to high school, he decided exactly what he wanted to do: work in communications, no matter what type.

And he wanted to play basketball. He joined the varsity team in his freshman year. By junior year, he and his teammates made it to the New York State High School Basketball Championship playoffs in Glens Falls, NY. They fell just short of becoming state champs in 1993, losing to Whitney Point. It was a disappointment, Infanti said, but his coach encouraged the team to keep reaching for the prize.

“I remember Coach (Pat) Donnelly, after one practice in particular, talking to the team,” Infanti said. “It was coming off the disappointment of the year before and I remember him telling us that we had the chance to do something special.”

“At 17-years-old, you think of it as doing something special on the basketball court. But I feel like the message that day was more about how we can do something special in our lives and try to be better brothers and sons and fathers.”

In his senior year at Ludden, Infanti and his team did something special on the court as well. They captured the 1994 state championship trophy.

He recalled the big day. “I just remember at Glens Falls, we had a great contingent of fans. I remember it like it was yesterday. Teachers were there, we had nuns in the stands and priests in the stands, classmates, parents, family and friends. It was quite a run.”

Infanti still stays in touch with Donnelly, a ’76 Ludden alumnus who has coached at his alma mater for 26 years and was honored by the New York State Basketball Coaches Hall of Fame in 2013.

“Even though we’ve graduated and gone off to college or the real world, he didn’t forget about us...
because we don’t play basketball for him anymore. We still have that family-type relationship.”

That family feel was a hallmark of Infanti’s Catholic schooling through the years. Raised by parents whose own parochial schools backgrounds influenced the way they raised him and his sister Lynn, he credits the tight-knit community in which he has been educated with helping him face even the toughest of life’s challenges.

“My parents made a lot of sacrifices for me, sending me and my sister to Catholic school,” he said. “It helped me learn discipline and the importance of rules and helped me academically. And it helped me with my faith.”

His faith was put to the extreme test ten years ago when his mother, who was the librarian at Ludden for 19 years, died after a battle with breast cancer. “She was very young, 55 at the time. I feel like that faith that was instilled in me by my parents, by St. Ann’s, through Bishop Ludden, it helped me get through it. I don’t know if you’re ever over it, but it certainly helped me through it.”

“She was my biggest fan, along with my dad, and I feel like I owe them a lot for where I am,” Infanti added. “I wouldn’t be here without them.”

Christy Perry is a freelance writer in Syracuse, NY.
Holy Family Teacher Puts Trust in Catholic Education

BY CAROLINE K. REFF

Carol Shifflet has taught her students many important lessons over nearly four decades of teaching at Holy Family School in Fairmount, NY. One of the most important, however, is quite simple: trust her.

“Each year, it’s important for me to establish a class that has trust in me and a trust for each other,” said Shifflet, who currently teaches 6th grade. “That kind of trust allows kids to buy into their education and realize that the sky is the limit for them. It makes them say, ‘I can do this. I can accomplish something great.’ It’s a philosophy that has evolved over my years as a teacher. It’s not always easily doable, and it doesn’t occur overnight. But when it does happen, it’s well worth it.”

This kind of insight is one that only comes from experience. Shifflet gained hers within the walls of Holy Family. In 1974, the new college graduate was eager for any job that would put her in a classroom, especially at a time when teaching jobs were scarce.

“When Sister Rosaline from Holy Family called to offer me a job teaching 5th grade, I jumped at the opportunity and was grateful for it,” she said.

Shifflet didn’t necessarily intend to spend her entire teaching career inside one school — no less a Catholic school — but, looking back, she knows it was the right decision.

“Of course, I thought about applying for jobs in the public schools, but it was never quite right for

Sixth grade teacher Carol Shifflet holds class at Holy Family School in Syracuse.
me. I enjoy everyone here — my colleagues, the parents, and, of course, the kids. I feel fortunate that I am able to pray with them every day and focus on their faith," she said. "The older I get, the more I appreciate how special Catholic education is and how important the values that come along with it are to my students. Character building, good manners, respect for yourself and others, and, of course, the Catholic faith — these fill a big place in our students. It's something I know they will take with them long after they leave Holy Family School.”

This school year marks Shifflet’s thirty-sixth at Holy Family, having taken three years off when she had her son. The veteran teacher has lost track of how many children have passed through her classroom doors since she began, but she is often reminded of the impact she’s made when former students greet her in the grocery store or stop into the school to say hello. Some even come to Meet the Teacher night — as parents of her current students!

While the day she first walked into Holy Family School seems like a lifetime ago, Shifflet has no plans to retire. She will continue to serve as a trusted teacher and a true example of the satisfaction that a career in Catholic education can bring.

“I will retire when I don’t love it anymore — when I don’t have the enthusiasm necessary to greet these kids every day,” she said. “But, I have a lot to do until then, so I don’t think it’s going to happen any time soon.” —

Caroline K. Reff is a freelance writer in Syracuse, NY, and editor of Pillars magazine.

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Most Holy Rosary Students Benefit From Literacy Initiative

BY CLAUDIA MATHIS

The reading and writing skills of students at Most Holy Rosary School in Syracuse have steadily improved over the last two and one half years due to the implementation of the school’s Literacy Initiative.

The initiative was kicked off during the 2011-12 school year with the goal of providing the students with the comprehension strategies they need to become successful readers and critical thinkers. The faculty felt that reading comprehension was an area that needed more attention.

The project got its start after Most Holy Rosary reading specialist Janice Rupe returned from an International Reading Conference. She was impressed by a presentation about a school in Virginia that had employed the Literary Initiative.

“I thought it was exactly what the school needed,” said Rupe.

After discussing the possibility of starting up the program at her school with her coworkers, a decision was made to incorporate it into the school’s curriculum. Rupe now serves as the coordinator of the program.

The first year’s project was entitled “Give Some Attention to Comprehension.” Each month, the students focused on one comprehension strategy. Strategies were introduced through engaging, interactive activities during school assemblies. A team of teachers met monthly to plan the assemblies and write songs for the strategies, and cartoon characters were created for each strategy.

At the conclusion of the first year-long initiative, Most Holy Rosary held its first annual Family Literacy Night in May 2012. The students sang the comprehension strategy songs for their parents at the well-attended event.

Last year’s project, “Writing is Exciting! 6 + 1 is Tons of Fun,” taught the six traits of writing: ideas, personal voice, sentence fluency, organization, word choice and conventions (grammar). Rosary’s 3rd grade teacher created cartoon characters for each trait. Rupe taught lessons on the traits and each of the teachers focused on a different one each month. The librarian and technology teacher guided the students in completing a research and writing project about an animal of their choice, and the projects were displayed at the second annual Family Literacy Night, which was even more successful than the first.

This year, in an effort to more fully implement the Common Core State Standards, the faculty decided to focus on nonfiction writing. The theme is American history and its heroes. Each grade has been assigned a different topic. The students will write about American heroes, the exploration era, Native Americans, the colonial period, the music of the revolutionary colonial period, the westward expansion and the Civil War era.

Rupe said that at this year’s Family Literacy Night, 5th and 6th grade students will be a part of a reenactment of Syracuse’s Underground Railroad and Jerry Rescue.

Overall, the initiative has been very successful at Most Holy Rosary. “The children’s comprehension skills are improving,” she said. “Fewer children need intervention. It’s successful because everyone is involved in it, and we’re focusing on the same thing. We’re building on it every year.” —

Claudia Mathis is a staff writer for The Catholic Sun.
Seton Senior Teaches Baseball to Haitian Children

BY CLAUDIA MATHIS

It started with a dream and ended as a life-altering experience for Connor McCormack, a senior at Seton Catholic Central High School in Binghamton. Last January, McCormack, a compassionate young man, felt the need to help impoverished children in Haiti. As a baseball enthusiast who has played from the time he was 5 years old, McCormack decided that he wanted to teach the sport to the Haitian children. “The idea grew on me,” remembered McCormack.

McCormack approached his theology teacher, Sister Brigid O’Mahoney, MHJ, with his plan to set up a baseball camp so that he could teach the sport to the Haitian children. She told him that his idea would indeed be feasible during a mission trip planned for the summer. Each year, Seton faculty members Sister Brigid and Sister Lorraine Mangini, MHJ, coordinate a mission trip for Seton students. McCormack set about gathering volunteers and developing a plan to collect baseball equipment for the mission. Two of his friends agreed to help out. The project quickly took off after they began to receive donations of equipment and money from parishes, family and friends in the Binghamton and Syracuse areas. “We thought we would get maybe 10 gloves but ended up getting 56 instead,” said McCormack.

On June 29, 2013, McCormack, along with more students and some other volunteers, travelled to Haiti with the donated baseball bats, gloves, hats and t-shirts. After the word got out that someone from the U.S. would be teaching baseball to them, 70 to 80 children showed up. McCormack said the children were extremely excited. “It was awesome,” he recalled. “I didn’t realize how big it would get.”

The volunteers split the children into four teams, each sporting a different colored t-shirt and hat. McCormack said he found that teaching the children proved to be a very rewarding experience.
“It was a great feeling to see them falling in love with the sport,” he said. “I liked introducing them to something new. They didn’t want to stop playing, and for a while, they weren’t worried about anything.”

McCormack and his fellow instructors taught the basics of baseball every morning for the next four days. The high schooler had previously wanted to hold two training sessions each day but revised his plans after realizing that the intense heat of the afternoons would make it difficult.

Before the children headed out to play baseball, they were given instruction on whiteboards. Because the language barrier was tough, four translators were employed to help teach the children.

When the volunteers returned to the U.S., they left the baseball equipment behind, along with instructions so that the four translators could continue teaching the children.

Before McCormack returned home, he visited the Mother Therese’s Children’s Hospital in Port-au-Prince. That experience made an enormous impression on him. So much so, that he plans to revisit the hospital in December. “It’s number one on my list of places to help out,” McCormack said.

Back in Binghamton, McCormack is completing his senior year of high school and doing well. He said he excels in math and science and plans to major in engineering while at college. McCormack has other interests in addition to baseball. He enjoys golf, hanging with friends and serves as varsity football running back and linebacker at Seton.

McCormack’s trip to Haiti has changed his outlook on life. “It opened my eyes and gave me a lot of perspective on the world,” he said. When asked if he thought he had made a difference in the Haitian children’s lives, McCormack responded, “A little bit, I guess. I taught them a new sport. It gave them a chance to get away from it all and to have fun.” He also said his faith was a determining factor in his decision to teach baseball to the children. “I like to give back as much as I can,” he said.

Claudia Mathis is a staff writer for The Catholic Sun.

Double Trouble
Immaculate Conception School in Fayetteville has eight sets of twins and one set of triplets in its student body this year! Pictured, left to right, front row: Ben and John Prendergast (Pre-K), Aaron, Dulcinea and Aiden Holcomb (K), Emmeline and Fielding Reinhardt (Grade 2), and Patrick and Ryan Grady (Grade 4); back row: Sam Johnston (Grade 6), Alex and Aiden Stuttard (Grade 2), Alexandra and Logan Roueche (Grade 3), Isabella and Talia Cannizzaro (Grade 4), Carter and Kevin Stewart (Grade 3) and Tavish Johnston (Grade 6). “It is a blessing to have them at school and watch them grow to be the same but yet so different,” said IC Principal Sally Lisi.
Andy Ryan has been saved by the bell. The school bell, that is. On September 4, 2013, the first day of school, St. Mary’s School in Cortland opened its doors to its first 7th grade class in over 30 years. Andy was one of 13 seventh graders who entered this fall. Andy thought that he would probably have to attend 7th grade at a public school until he heard last year that the new 7th grade would be put in place at St. Mary’s this September.

“My parents left the decision up to me,” said Andy, who entered St. Mary’s as a 5th grader from a public school. “I never wanted to leave St. Mary’s. I knew it would never be the same without my friends if I went to a public school.” Denise Hall, principal at St. Mary’s, said parents have wanted a junior high for a long time. In the past, students had to travel to Binghamton or Syracuse to continue their Catholic education after 6th grade.

“Many parents are not ready to let go of the small setting where everyone knows and cares for their child,” said Hall. “They have expressed that 7th and 8th grade are very formative years, and they want their children in St. Mary’s.

“We had a committee in the early to mid-’90s look at the feasibility and the conditions were just not right,” Hall said. “Representatives of that old committee and new members approached me and we had many discussions. The bottom line is the school’s finances were looking good, and we had the classrooms to accommodate the students. With increasing enrollment, financial security and recent upgrades to technology and programs, I felt like now was the time. We talked with our pastor at the time, and he supported the idea.”
Hall is very pleased with the implementation of the 7th grade this year. "I have heard positive comments from teachers, parents and students," she said. "Two parents have recently stated that it was the best decision that they ever made. The students are comfortable. They already know each other and they are ready to take risks. This maximizes their potential for the year."

The 7th graders' school day is very different from what they were accustomed to in the elementary grades. The junior high students move freely throughout the school between classes, with their iPads marking the beginning and end of the class periods. A total of 13 teachers instruct the young teens in the subjects of English language arts, home and careers, math, social studies, science, French, Spanish, physical education, art and music. They also belong to clubs and engage in sports that are only available to 7th graders. In addition, the 7th grade students also have a "lounge" they can call their own. The room was designed by parents and students and is used for their study halls and sometimes religion classes.

"Two parents have recently stated that it was the best decision that they ever made. The students are comfortable. They already know each other, and they are ready to take risks. This maximizes their potential for the year."

—DENISE HALL

Andy said that so far, his time as a 7th grader has been very enjoyable. "It's been a great experience," he said. "I like being in a smaller classroom. It's lots of fun, and everyone holds the door for you. It's really welcoming, and my classmates are friendly."

His parents are happy with his decision to attend St. Mary’s. "My grandparents are too," added Andy. "Especially my grandpa — he went to St. Mary’s all the way through high school."

Hall has witnessed the way the 7th graders have matured this year. "These students have gone from elementary students to confident, responsible, faith-filled young adults," she said, noting that plans are in the works to add an 8th grade next fall. "We are able to see their spiritual growth in action. Our 7th graders have reached that maturity and feel so comfortable with themselves that they are really serving as a light to others! John Baptist de La Salle, the patron saint of teachers, is quoted for saying, 'To touch the hearts of your pupils and to inspire them with the Christian spirit is the greatest miracle you can perform.' It is true for us at St. Mary’s, and it is why most of us are here. The students feel it, the parents feel it, and the staff feels it. It is wonderful to get another couple of years to inspire and to be inspired. I do find the 7th graders inspiring and am so grateful for their presence."

Claudia Mathis is a staff writer for The Catholic Sun.

St. Rose of Lima School in No. Syracuse honored those who served the U.S.A on Veterans Day 2013 with Onondaga County Executive Joanie Mahoney.
The Family That Prays Together, Stays (In Catholic School) Together

BY CHRISTY PERRY

He was a student in Central New York Catholic schools for 13 years. He now teaches French at Bishop Grimes Prep, where he won an award for his dedication to Catholic education. His wife also teaches at Grimes, and his two children are students at Blessed Sacrament.

Pat Kinne attended Syracuse’s St Vincent’s, St. Lucy’s, Blessed Sacrament and Grimes. His mother taught at St. Lucy’s for 21 years, which he says definitely influenced his willingness to teach in the Syracuse Diocese.

Yet he was raised in — and still attends — a Protestant church. Have differences between the Christian traditions ever been a challenge for him as a student or teacher?

“No,” Kinne said. “Even as a student, I just found it really interesting to see the differences but more so the similarities between our faiths. It’s never been an issue.”

In fact, he very much missed being in a faith-based educational setting in his first job as a public school teacher. “One of the things I missed the most when I was teaching [in public school] was never being able to cross that line. [In Catholic school] we could always talk about how this or that related to faith. And I missed that a lot.”

Kinne’s upbringing in the Reformed Church of Syracuse, a denomination that dates back to the Protestant Reformation in 16th Century Europe, included spending summers at Camp Fowler in Lake Pleasant, NY. Just after graduating from Bishop Grimes in 1998, he took a job as an arts and crafts counselor at the camp. That summer he met Sarah Huizenga, a fellow counselor from Kankakee, Ill. Kinne and Sarah became friends and eventually began dating. They were married in 2002 and settled in Saint Ann, Ill., close to Sarah’s parents.

Kinne stayed in touch with his principal at Grimes, Rev. Msgr. George Sheehan. While teaching in Illinois in 2003, Kinne contacted Sheehan to let him know that he was looking for a job change. Soon after, the principal called him back and said Grimes needed a French teacher.

“We just took it on faith that that was what we were supposed to do, and it’s been really good for us,” Kinne said.

The move back to Syracuse brought Kinne and Sarah closer to his parents, Chuck and Margaret “Ellie” Kinne. Just how close? A realtor recommended a house in the eastern part of the city that was just six doors down from Chuck and Ellie. They bought it, and, Sarah said, “It worked out very well.”

Sarah, a Spanish teacher, soon began substitute teaching at Grimes. “It was comfort,” she said. “I liked the atmosphere there. It was like family.” She is now both a foreign language teacher and director of the attendance office at the school.
“I’m not Catholic,” she said, “but I get to learn a lot of the traditions and then I get to share them in Spanish. So they’re learning ‘The Our Father’ in Spanish.”

Pat Kinne chairs the Foreign Language Department at Grimes, is Student Council Advisor and also sits on the schools’ Consultative Board. In addition, he is vice-president of the Reformed Church of Syracuse’s Consistory, which is that congregation’s governing board.

He was honored to win Bishop Grimes Prep’s Barrett Award, which is given to an alumnus who shows outstanding leadership and dedication to Catholic education. “As an alumnus and a teacher, that really meant a lot,” he said.

A happy by-product of being foreign language teachers at Grimes is that Kinne and Sarah are able to travel with students to Europe. They have taken groups to London, Paris, Madrid and Barcelona. “It’s fun to see the kids experiencing something new that you can’t translate in the classroom,” Sarah said.

Their daughter Hannah is 8 years old and son Alec is 6. When the time came for Hannah to start kindergarten, Kinne wanted to enroll her at Blessed Sacrament. “I dragged my feet,” said Sarah. “It was hard to resist Huntington’s [Huntington School in Syracuse] proximity and price. So we tried it out for a year. But it was not the best place for Hannah.”

The couple said Blessed Sacrament Principal Andrea Polcaro welcomed Hannah to 1st grade with open arms. And when it was Alec’s turn to start kindergarten, he started at Blessed Sacrament, too. “It was a no-brainer,” Sarah said.

When asked what he likes about his school, Alec returned the question with a question: “What about ten things?” he asked, grinning.

The Kinne kids have become regulars in the halls of Bishop Grimes. They have attended basketball games, homecoming dances, concerts, award ceremonies and graduations at the school. The faculty and staff know them well.

Hannah sees many similarities between her Catholic school and Sunday School lessons. She said she’s learned many of the same stories, and in both places, she knows people are praying for her and she’s praying for them.

“Knowing that they’re getting academically tended to but also spiritually tended to—that’s key,” Kinne said. “Just seeing the love and care that all of their teachers have for them, it just doesn’t get any better than that.”

Christy Perry is a freelance writer in Syracuse, NY.
Schools Rally to Support One of Their Own Through Kelleigh’s Cause

BY KATHERINE LONG

Before taking the microphone to speak to students and faculty at St. Mary's Academy in Baldwinsville last April, Kelleigh Gustafson recalls panicking just a bit. At the time, Kelleigh, now a senior at Bishop Grimes Prep in East Syracuse, had never spoken to a crowd about arteriovenous malformation, the life-threatening vascular condition she was diagnosed with at age 4, or Kelleigh's Cause, the organization she and her family founded to raise funds for research about the disease. She had preferred not to draw attention to her condition. Even her friends knew only "bits and pieces" of her story.

The nerves lingered "just until I started speaking," Kelleigh remembered. "Then it was fine." Looking out over the crowd of elementary school students, she explained how her mother, Lori, had noticed a bruise on her temple when she was two days old and how doctors assured her mom it was just a type of birthmark that would eventually disappear. She shared that an MRI a few years later revealed a rare, dangerous and incurable condition called arteriovenous malformations (AVMs), which affected all of the blood vessels on the right side of her head, neck and chest.

AVMs are the result of a birth defect that causes abnormal blood vessel growth. In typical anatomies, arteries and veins are connected by capillaries; together, they work to effectively circulate blood throughout the body. In AVMs, however, the capillaries are missing and blood rushes quickly through the delicate vessels. Complications from the condition include hemorrhage, seizure and congestive heart failure.

In her speech, Kelleigh touched on some of the darker moments of her disease and how her faith helped her through. At age 7, she had a near-fatal reaction during a drug treatment trial. Just days after receiving Anointing of the Sick, she announced she had to "get better so I can receive Jesus" and was granted two hours' leave from the intensive care unit in order to make her First Communion.

She also talked about the difficult surgeries, performed every few months by interventional radiologist Dr. Patricia Burrows, that have kept her disease at bay. Though necessary, the surgeries carry risks of paralysis, blindness, stroke or even death.
Following one such surgery in August 2012, Burrows told the Gustafsons that it was becoming increasingly difficult to treat Kelleigh's condition. The family realized it was more important than ever to raise awareness of and find a cure for AVMs, not just for Kelleigh, but for all people affected by the disease. And so Kelleigh's Cause was born.

Kelleigh's speech at St. Mary's was delivered in advance of her organization's first major fundraising initiative: a dress-down day held simultaneously in Catholic schools across the Diocese of Syracuse and Kelleigh's native Diocese of Lansing, Mich. The idea—a day when a small donation “buys” a student the opportunity to wear casual clothes to school instead of the standard uniform—came from a group of Kelleigh's friends, Lori Gustafson said. On April 19, 2013, a dozen schools from the Diocese of Syracuse participated in the dress-down day, as did 11 from Michigan, raising nearly $13,000 for Kelleigh's Cause.

“The success of the dress-down day — I have to give credit to the Catholic schools because they all banded together and complete strangers came together for this cause,” Lori Gustafson said. “We were constantly shocked by going to the mailbox [and finding] another check from another school.”

To date, Kelleigh's Cause has raised nearly $50,000, the result of the dress-down day, generous donations, numerous fundraising events, a charity run in Lansing and a $500 gift from the Bishop Grimes Class of 2013. The Gustafsons are at work on a new round of fundraising activities for this school year and hope to repeat and expand on the success of the dress-down day. The initial goal, Kelleigh said, is to raise $150,000 for the Children's Hospital of Wisconsin, where Burrows is part of a team pursuing research into a cure for AVMs. The long-term vision for the organization is to become "a very well-known cause and charity" in the nation and perhaps even the around the world.

More than just raising money, however, Kelleigh's Cause is about "sharing our faith and what this journey has taught us," Lori Gustafson said. “It’s about seeing the face of God in all the people we’ve met along the way. The purpose of [Kelleigh] being here is to give people hope.”

For more information about AVMs and Kelleigh's Cause, visit www.kelleigh.org or “like” www.facebook.com/KelleighsCause.

Katherine Long is the editor of The Catholic Sun. Portions of this article appeared in her story about Kelleigh's Cause published in the April 4, 2013 issue of the Sun.
Sister Nicolette Brings Drama to Blessed Sacrament School

BY CLAUDIA MATHIS

Sister Nicolette Vennaro, OSF, 3rd grade teacher and drama coach at Blessed Sacrament School in Syracuse, is somewhat of a legend. She is known for producing theatrical productions for the last 52 years at Catholic schools in New Jersey and the Syracuse Diocese.

“I’ve always been interested in producing plays,” said Sister Nicolette. “It’s hard work, but it’s a joy to do it. Seeing the kids go on to take part in other schools’ productions, seeing the after effect — it’s great for the children.”

Andrea Polcaro, principal of Blessed Sacrament, said she feels very blessed to have Sister Nicolette on the faculty. “She has an unbelievable talent for bringing out the very best in her drama students,” Polcaro said. “Our students benefit from her expertise in so many ways — improved self-confidence, better public speaking skills and learning how to work cooperatively to achieve a common goal.”

At 72 years old, Sister Nicolette has boundless energy. Besides serving as a source of inspiration to her 3rd grade students and the children in her drama classes, she is a long distance runner who has competed in marathons throughout New York State and in Hawaii.

“I get a sense of inner peace when I’m running,” commented Sister Nicolette, who also works out at a fitness center regularly. Over the summer, Sister Nicolette coaches the school’s track and field team, the Tiny Eagles.

A native of Utica, NY, Sister Nicolette grew up in the parish of St. Francis de Sales. She attended D’Youville College in Buffalo and Scranton University. After teaching at St. Joseph’s School in Camden, N.J., she served at St. James, St. Rose of Lima and at St. Lucy’s schools, all in Syracuse, before coming to Blessed Sacrament 12 years ago. Today, Sister Nicolette enjoys her 3rd graders immensely.

“They’re so eager to learn, and I love their honesty,” she said.

Sister Nicolette produces one theatrical production every year. “Usually, 90 children sign up — almost one third of the school,” she explained. The number of children that sign up usually number far more than the parts that are available, so Sister Nicolette rewrites the play in order to give everyone a part, instinctively knowing what part should be given to which child. She observes the children through the drama classes held...
after school, one for 1st, 2nd and 3rd graders and another for 4th, 5th and 6th grade students. By enrolling in the drama classes, Sister Nicolette said, the children discover talents that they didn’t know they had. She thinks it’s beneficial to practice music, dance and public speaking. Their progress is enhanced by the fact that, at their age, they don’t feel self-conscious when performing. “Their singing is great,” remarked Sister Nicolette. “We have a great music teacher, Mary Lynn Giacobbe, to help them along.” Starting each January, Sister Nicolette assigns the parts to the children, and they begin to practice the play, scene by scene. They usually rehearse one to two times per week. Known for her dedication to her students and to her productions, Sister Nicolette devotes her spring break to preparing the props and scenery for the play, building and painting the sets. “I love doing it,” she remarked. Each spring, the children perform their play at the Palace Theatre in Syracuse, as well as several performances at Blessed Sacrament School.

This year, Sister Nicolette is producing Hansel and Gretel. In addition to the parts of Hansel and Gretel, she will assign parts such as the troll, Dew Princess, the witch, trees, flowers, gingerbread cookies and the chorus, to name a few. She said she gets her ideas from watching plays. “I study them,” she said. “I do mostly Disney plays.”

Last year, she produced Rocking Snow White and has also directed Mother Goose, Peter Pan, The Wizard of Oz, Little Red Riding Hood and Pinnochio. She is especially proud of the time that she and her students were invited to a drama competition at Hamilton College to compete against schools throughout New York State. Her 109 Blessed Sacrament students placed second in the competition by performing Alice in Wonderland.

“I thought they should have won first prize,” she said.

Claudia Mathis is a staff writer for The Catholic Sun.

Smiling Faces

First graders at St. Patrick’s School, Oneida, visit The Hazel Carpenter Home to sing songs and chat with the senior residents. Every grade at the school visits at some point throughout the school year, bringing the seniors a friendly face and giving student a sense of joy from giving back.
I am not my story and my story is not who I am. The story of Saint Marianne Cope, Kate Mahoney said, is not only the saint’s story or the story of those who worked toward her sainthood. It is not just the story of those who happened to survive due to St. Marianne's miraculous intercession. This story belongs to all of us. And that is precisely the story Kate Mahoney wants to share.

Mahoney is known for dodging death when she was a young teenager thanks to a miracle attributed to St. Marianne Cope. In the 19th Century when people feared disease and the infirm even more than they do today, St. Marianne, a Syracuse Franciscan sister, ministered to the sick, opened medical facilities and even cared for lepers in Hawaii. “She was ahead of her time,” said Mahoney. “Everything she did, she made sure it was open to everyone.”

It appears that included an average 20th Century teenager. In 1992, Mahoney was visiting relatives in Central New York with her parents. The family was between homes in Ireland and Virginia, but Mahoney’s diagnosis of malignant germ cell ovarian cancer transformed the visit into a permanent move. Deciding to stay in the Syracuse area to continue with their daughter’s existing medical team, her parents quickly enrolled her in Bishop Ludden Junior/Senior High School between chemotherapy treatments.

Mahoney had a stage four tumor. It was the size of a basketball and was pressing against her spine. She was one of only 1,000 other individuals with the disease at the time -- and few were young people.

In a recent address to the Diocesan Panel at Bishop Grimes Junior/Senior High School, she said, “I arrived at Ludden for the first day of school and my hair was beginning to fall out … I had met maybe three or four people but had only one friend, and I have to use that title loosely because by the time friendships would have firmly established to start the year I was back in the hospital for chemo.”

She has no memory of the timeframe between November 1992 and February 1993. During that time, and due to the rigorous cancer treatment, Mahoney said that her “body had been ravaged by the cure.” She experienced multi-system organ failure and while in the intensive care unit at Crouse Hospital she reached a place where, for the average patient, there is no going back. By all accounts, death was inevitable.

A visit from Sister Mary Laurence Hanley on January 3, 1993, changed the course of Mahoney’s story forever. The Franciscan sister began praying to St. Marianne for intercession on behalf of the 14-year-old and placed a relic that belonged to St.
Marianne near Mahoney’s organs. Prayers spread to Syracuse’s Franciscan residence, St. Marianne’s Utica hometown and the Bishop Ludden student body. Before long, Mahoney’s name was listed on a prayer chain that spanned countries and denominations.

“It was not a biblical recovery,” she described. “I did not wake up to throw away my crutches nor did I regain it sight unseen, but my organs did recover. They recovered to the lowest function but enough so that all the specialists could step back in and work with their capable hands.”

She says that after 47 days intubated in the ICU, she was released from the grasps of hallucinogenic and paralytic drugs to find that she couldn’t walk, lift her arms or produce sound with her voice. The long road to recovery had begun.

Today, Mahoney says she considers St. Marianne a personal friend. “For me, my journey with Mother Marianne isn’t about my illness at all. It’s about my life before, during and after. Because I believe she has always been with me. We have such trust in her that while we pray to her, we also talk to her, about everything.”

While that personal conversation continues, Mahoney has made it her ministry by telling her own story to encourage others to enlist in this kind of interaction. “The dialogue itself helps shape our world and relationships,” she said.

“For years I never wanted to talk about the miracle. But now I’m so comfortable living in it that I want share it,” said Mahoney. “It’s the message of listening to each other and really hearing what we all have to say.”

Mahoney admits that learning some decorum helped her find the right things to say. For a time, while St. Marianne’s beatification was pending, Mahoney used to say, “I don’t need anyone to tell me I was part of a miracle.” That nonchalance did not always go over well with traditionalists, she noted. Instead, she followed the lead of St. Marianne and learned better ways to share her message.

“Mother Marianne knew when to step in and when to step back. But, she was always moving forward,” Mahoney said.

Mahoney’s experience as a teenager colors her relationship with St. Marianne and the young people she hopes to reach out to in her own ministry.

At the Diocesan panel at Bishop Grimes, she concluded her presentation by saying, “In an age range when kids are figuring out who they are, we do not have the right to tell them who they can and can’t be. We have an obligation to foster them as they grow into whoever it is they are going to become. We have a duty to Mother Marianne to let everyone who walks into our lives know that they matter and they are safe.”
CATHOLIC SCHOOLS OF THE DIOCESE OF SYRACUSE

Mission Statement

The Catholic Schools in the Diocese of Syracuse carry out the mission of Jesus Christ, bearing witness while proclaiming the Gospel message. Together with families and parishes, our schools provide an education rooted in the Gospel that is “living, conscious, and active” including values and ideals that are in accordance with the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church. We empower our students to live their faith with compassion, integrity and respect for all life and the diversity of our world.

Our schools are faith-centered communities focused on promoting academic excellence while developing a strong moral conscience and embracing Catholic principles to enable students to meet lifelong challenges and demands in our rapidly changing world.

Approved, August 21, 2013
Most Rev. Robert J. Cunningham
Bishop of Syracuse

Profile of the Graduate

Graduates of the Catholic schools in the Diocese of Syracuse will:

LIVE THEIR FAITH BY:

- Knowing, understanding and promoting the Catholic faith
- Protecting and nurturing human life at all stages
- Exhibiting behavior and making decisions that reflect high moral character and values of our faith: integrity, honesty, self-control and concern for others
- Serving God through service to others in society and the Church
- Respecting the dignity of others, including those of other cultures and traditions, as modeled by Jesus, with acceptance, empathy, compassion, and loving all
- Being good stewards of God’s gifts
- Continuing to devote attention to their own ongoing faith formation and the evangelization of others
- Providing leadership to the Church and future generations

Celebrating the Mission

With the blessing of Bishop Robert J. Cunningham, we celebrated the shared Mission Statement of the 22 schools in the Diocese of Syracuse at the Opening of Schools Liturgy. Representatives from each of the schools who serve on the Middle States Accreditation System Planning Team recently penned the statement for the school system. The writing process served to remind us that, even though our schools may be located in various geographic areas, we share a common ministry. Whether we serve in elementary or secondary schools, we are members of faith communities committed to the education of the whole person.

In keeping with the Middle States accreditation process, and with a deliberate focus on faith formation, academic excellence, character development and physical education, we are striving to establish cultures of continuous improvement throughout the system. The mission statement, as well as the additional foundation documents of Belief Statements and Profile of the Graduate provides direction and guidance in goal setting.

Students at Cathedral Academy at Pompei arrive for the first day of school in September 2013.
USE THEIR EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES BY:
- Mastering a rigorous academic program with disciplined work and study skills
- Continuing to build on a strong academic foundation provided in Catholic schools as life-long learners dedicated to academic excellence
- Being effective communicators, orally, in written form, and in the use of technology
- Using technology in an ethical manner to access information and share information
- Demonstrating the acquisition of life skills that promote cooperation, creative thinking, critical thinking, and problem solving in a variety of settings
- Taking active roles as responsible community leaders in order to make significant positive contributions
- Demonstrating an appreciation for and support of the Arts

Belief Statements

SPIRITUAL
WE BELIEVE THAT...
- Jesus is the Master Teacher and role model for educators.
- Catholic schools carry out the educational mission of the Church and maintain healthy relationships with parishes.
- Schools within the system are aware of and focused on the common mission of Catholic schools in our diocese; the Catholic Identity of our schools provides the added dimension of a Catholic school education.
- Parents are the primary educators of their children; Catholic schools work in partnership with parents to transmit our faith and values.
- Teachers in our schools are prophets; they bring the Good news of God’s love and salvation.

ACADEMIC
WE BELIEVE THAT...
- Christ-centered environments support the healthy growth of the whole person: physically, emotionally, spiritually and academically.
- Children learn at different rates and in different ways; each is a unique child of God.
- Academic excellence is a worthwhile and attainable goal.
- Quality athletic and extracurricular programs are important components of a comprehensive educational program.
- Teachers in our schools are prophets; they bring the Good news of God’s love and salvation.
- Teachers should be immersed in collaborative professional learning communities that foster growth in all areas of responsibilities.
- Our school cultures should promote continuous improvement of individuals and programs.
- Schools within the system should be aligned in regard to educational programs while adhering to National, State and Diocesan standards.

STEWARDSHIP
WE BELIEVE THAT...
- Schools should practice sound fiscal and responsible stewardship practices.
- Students should develop leadership skills that enable them to be responsible citizens who serve others.
- Catholic schools teach students to be stewards of the gifts and talents God has given them.
- Students should have a sense of responsibility for the environment and all of God’s gifts.

SOCIAL
WE BELIEVE THAT...
- Students should be taught to view all people as the family of God; appreciation and respect for diversity is necessary for Christian behavior.
- School communities should foster the growth of caring, compassionate, and morally sound individuals who follow God’s command to love one another.
Entering the new Montessori kindergarten at Notre Dame Elementary School in Utica, you may as well be walking into a Japanese Zen garden. It is that peaceful and orderly — even with the children in it. This is not surprising given that the Montessori philosophy holds that through order and self-discipline, a child is free to reach his or her fullest potential.

On this particular autumn day, the class was learning about different types of pumpkins. Two or three children sat at each of several small tables studying a picture of a particular pumpkin variety. They then began painting pictures of their assigned variety. There were no splotches of paint on the tables or unruly children, just quiet concentration.

As stated in a Notre Dame Montessori handbook, “The world of a child is full of sights and sounds, which first appear chaotic. From this chaos, the child must gradually create order, and learn to distinguish among the impressions that assail his/her senses, slowly but surely gaining mastery of him/herself and the environment.”

Yet, there is sometimes a misconception that with this freedom, the classroom is pandemonium, said Carol Polito, Notre Dame Elementary assistant principal who directs the school’s early education programs. “Because a child can go as far as he or she is able, it’s work, not chaos. The children can take any lesson or subject further if that is what they choose. Montessori allows for the child who excels and for the one who needs more time,” she pointed out.

A student needed the attention of the teacher. Rather than interrupting or waving his hand wildly in the air, the young boy gently laid his hand on his teacher’s arm until she was able to give him her attention. “They are taught this through the Montessori program,” said teacher Holly Gros. “They learn to respect each other and the materials. They learn about peaceful attentiveness.”

The multi-age program allows students to continue to progress at their own level while capitalizing on their natural curiosities, Polito described. Ambitious, and sometimes more experi-
enced, older students follow their interests while mentoring their peers in the process. Because the classroom is multi-age, some children have experienced Montessori learning for a couple of years, she said, and know exactly what is expected and what freedoms they have.

Long a fixture of Notre Dame Elementary, previously Our Lady of Lourdes Elementary, Montessori has been a part of the pre-school program at the school since the mid-'70s, said Polito. The class was always full, and there have been waiting lists for the school’s early education programs for a number of years.

Three years ago, a second Montessori pre-kindergarten was added with the financial help of the Heritage Fund. “Through the years parents have said to us that this program is wonderful. They’ve asked, ‘Why can’t we continue this?’” Polito said.

Thanks to the help of the Christ Child Society of Utica, a local chapter of an organization dedicated to the service of children in need, they did just that when school started this fall. Today, 15 students are part of the Montessori kindergarten class.

Five-year-old Kaytee Grabinski is one of the members of the class. Her mother, Sue Grabinski, said, “The practical way they go about teaching is beautiful. That classroom is filled with kindness and love.”

Gros, who received formal Montessori training following college but took some additional courses to prepare for the new class, described how great care and consideration goes into creating a truly Montessori learning environment. “There is a focus on natural materials,” she said. “You’ll notice that the mats and baskets are woven and our bulletin board is covered with burlap.” There are live plants in the space as well, Gros added, explaining how the use of natural materials and muted backgrounds help draw the children in.

All the materials including software used in the class are specifically Montessori tools. Even how things are arranged on a shelf or how mats are placed in a basket is done in the Montessori method. The children catch on to this tidiness quickly. “Our parents see it with the children at home and comment about the neatness and orderliness,” Polito said.

It is these new practical life skills, that Grabinski notices the most in Kaytee at home. “She always wants to fold things, fold blankets, because that is what they do at school,” she said.

It is noticed in other settings as well, Gros said. Other teachers, such as those teaching physical education and special subjects, are impressed and comment on how well the Montessori kindergarten students listen.

Comfortable with the long-standing history of Montessori success at the school, Polito was quick to add, “Well, why wouldn’t they? Wherever these children go, they’ll set an example.”

*Dyann Nashton is a freelance writer in Oneida, NY.*
Every Penny Counted to Make Playground Happen

By Christy Perry

St. Mary’s Academy 6th grader Max Lewis has a pretty big jar he uses to collect loose change. Judging from the way Max describes it, it’s about the size of a small barrel.

Max felt that getting a new playground for his Baldwinsville school was worth donating half of the coins in his giant money jar. Now that St. Mary’s students can clamber over and under the colorful bars and slides and rock wall, he is proud to have helped.

“Yeah, I feel good that I spent my money on it,” he said with a satisfied look.

Nine-year-old John Massaro did his part to raise money for the school’s playground by buying sweets at bake sales. His family also chipped in and bought a fundraiser brick.

According to St. Mary’s Principal Renae Henderson, the pre-K through 6th grade school was without a playground for decades. Before the play structure project began — it was dedicated and opened on October 30, 2013 — students had only a blacktop lot, shared by the school and church, on
Super Saints Promotes Athletics, Christian Service

By Dyann Nashton

How do you build a children's program that encourages creative thinking, generosity and physical activity? At Seton All Saints Elementary in Endicott, NY, you launch Super Saints. The new program was the brainchild of a relatively new teacher and grew as an offshoot of a fundraising event.

William Pipher completed his first year of teaching at the school at the end of last year and by then had become oriented to the school's programs and events. One event was an annual auction where offered up for bid were opportunities for students to spend some time with teachers at various outings. Venues included golf courses or bowling alleys.

It was not uncommon for these activities to be athletic in nature, according to Pipher. He began to consider offering something that promoted the scholar-athlete. “I really wanted to come up with something meaningful,” Pipher said.

The Super Saints program married the best of all worlds during an hour and a half timeframe each Friday for 10 weeks. With the help of fellow faculty member, Rebecca Falank, the students rotated from athletic activities to community service to creative thinking. They could be jumping rope before making cards to brighten the day of the students of a particular classroom and then could be found focusing on the mechanics of building bridges from Popsicle sticks.

It was clear early on that the Super Saints program was going to be a success. Twenty-eight students each bid $60 at the auction to be a part of the program, and it brought in more than $1,500.

The blend of types of activities is the key to its success. The athletic component of Super Saints provided children with a way to burn off some after-school energy while the service component taught them about giving back to their community.

Creative thinking was central to Super Saints and dovetailed with current enthusiasm for the Odyssey of the Mind program. Odyssey of the Mind is an international education program of creative problem solving for students from kindergarten through college. Participants compete at local, state and world levels. Pipher said that Odyssey of the Mind was hugely popular at Seton All Saints with 56 children participating out of an enrollment of 150 students.

At the conclusion of the 10 weeks, Pipher said, “It was more successful than any of us could have imagined it would be.” The possibility of expanding the program to include a Super Saints summer camp experience is being explored.

Dyann Nashton is a freelance writer based in Oneida, NY.
Banding Together at Notre Dame

If you ask anyone at Notre Dame Jr./Sr. High School in Utica, NY, what’s new, chances are the answer will have something to do with the sounds of music in school. That's because Notre Dame has launched a new instrumental band program this year.

“This is a fantastic opportunity for our students,” said Sister Anna Mae Collins, principal of Notre Dame Junior/Senior High School. “Music combines knowledge and skills that stretch across the curriculum. We believe that all students are individuals, who grow and flourish in different ways. By adding band to our curriculum, students are encouraged to develop their talents to the best of their abilities and make a positive contribution to their community by working together.”

There are many benefits to playing in the band. Studies have shown that students who participate in music classes make better grades and score higher on college entrance exams than students who don’t participate. In addition to the impact on student learning, music students are developing life skills that will prepare them for college, the workplace and personal success.

Notre Dame’s band/music teacher Kristin Hahn said there are many good reasons to join the band, and she will continue to emphasize how important it is to learn to play music. According to Hahn, that is just one part of the advantages of learning an instrument.

“What I see are students that have a sense of being a part of something. It gives students a place to belong, work and solve problems together. Music is unique and has many avenues for growth, and so much of what we do in the band room will transfer to other subject areas that require critical thinking skills,” she said.

The Notre Dame Junior/Senior High School Band has about 35 students and a beginning band at Notre Dame Elementary School. In addition, the school offers jazz band, chorus and a Praise and Worship Ensemble that performs for school liturgies. The school has invested in instruments, music, and equipment. The program is off and running with plans to continue to grow and flourish.

Already the school has some bragging points, including sending students to the 2013 Area All-State Band and plans for attending the All-County Festival and New York State School Music Association Solo Festival. Notre Dame continues to get the word out about the band program and the good work done at the school.
Dear Friends,

This year, the Church of the Diocese of Syracuse has committed itself to the New Evangelization. Simply put, the New Evangelization calls us to announce the Gospel with enthusiasm and ardor in the circumstances of our day using the most effective methods to us. We are called to take up anew the mission which has been part of the Church’s identity. As I have stated on many occasions, this requires us to know, live and share our Catholic faith.

On the Solemnity of Christ the King, I released a Pastoral letter entitled Faith: A Gift Received a Treasure to be Shared. In my letter, I offer three considerations which can support our efforts: Sunday Mass, Handing on the Faith and Vocations.

In my letter, I state: “As communities of faith our schools provide the sacred place where students encounter the living God in Jesus Christ and through the light of the Gospel and the guidance of committed teachers, engage in the dialogue that integrates faith and life. Our schools fulfill a primary role in the Church’s mission of evangelization. They need the support of our entire ecclesial community. Not only parents who support our schools through tuition, or parishes and regions which maintain a school through generous financial support, but parishes without schools and indeed all the faithful need to support our schools. This support can be given in various ways: prayer for their continued vitality; financial donations and contributions; gifts of time and talent. Past generations built our Catholic schools. Our generation, no less in need of them, must make them available and accessible for parents who chose them for their children.”

Please know of my gratitude for all that you have done to support our Catholic Schools. I count on your continued support on behalf of the mission of our Catholic Schools. Be assured of my prayers for you and your families.

Sincerely yours,

Most Reverend Robert J. Cunningham
Bishop of Syracuse
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