

Amen: Graduates introduced to greatness at Seton Keough

Weeks before the last senior class of The Seton Keough High School graduated, I had the opportunity to visit with three of its top members.

Samantha Benton, Miejo Dambita and De'Ara Graves were named Distinctive Scholars by the Archdiocese of Baltimore. The three young women also happen to embody three key aspects of a well-rounded education, which they will carry with them as they proceed to college and into the world.

Benton, a 17-year-old parishioner of St. Philip Neri in Linthicum, has pursued academic excellence with a focus beyond her years, which she credits Seton Keough with enabling.

"I just got a sense (when visiting the school as an eighth-grader) that these were people like me, and that the rigor of the courses and the teachers would get me to where I wanted to go in the future," she said.

She was right - at Seton Keough, Benton was president of the National Honor Society, secretary of the Spanish Honor Society and president of the Math Honor Society. At commencement, she was honored as salutatorian.

At Notre Dame of Maryland University, she will study environmental science with an eye toward eventual work in Latin America.

While also posting top-notch academics - she was, in fact, valedictorian - De'Ara Graves' Seton Keough years have been characterized by her developing political savvy and leadership skills.

"I knew something Seton Keough did have is diversity and opportunity," Graves said.

The 17-year-old Columbia resident laid relatively low and took stock of it all her freshman year and then jumped in, getting involved with student groups such as Women of Color, the feminist club, Model United Nations and Team One Love, an

organization that promotes healthy relationships.

Her senior year, Graves served as president of the student council.

Outside of school, she continued her involvement with the Howard County chapter of the NAACP, which she joined as a fifth-grader. As secretary of the youth council, she went to Washington, D.C., for the Congressional Black Caucus' Phoenix Awards Dinner Sept. 19, 2016. President Barack Obama was the keynote speaker.

Graves will return to Washington to attend Georgetown University.

Academics, leadership - what's next?

Dambita brings art into the picture. A scholarship for dance was one of three that helped her choose Seton Keough.

"When I went to my dance audition with Ms. Serene (Webber, the dance instructor), I saw, and my mom saw, that she saw potential in me," Dambita, a parishioner of the Church of the Crucifixion in Glen Burnie, remembered.

Webber was correct about the potential; Dambita will be attending the University of Maryland in College Park for free, all four years, thanks to a creative and performing arts scholarship.

"It made my dad cry when I got the letter," she said.

While Seton Keough has closed, Benton, Graves and Dambita - as well as their classmates and underclassmen - will keep the school's spirit alive.

"The three of them are exceptional young women," said Donna Bridickas, the school's president. "Whatever they do, they will carry the spirit of Seton Keough - the spirit of community, and the spirit of sisterhood."

Benton agreed, referencing a phrase from the school motto: "Once a woman of honor, always a woman of honor."

Also see:

'Sisters': Seton Keough students say farewell

Email Erik Zygmunt at ezygmunt@CatholicReview.org.