

Arts get a major boost at Hagerstown school

HAGERSTOWN – As 15-year-old Charlotte Riggs prepared to rehearse a show tune in a room attached to Thomas McFarland’s classroom, Mr. McFarland stopped what he was doing and crept beside the half-open door.

Quietly peering inside as a piano instructor started accompanying the young soloist, the fine arts chairperson at St. Maria Goretti High School in Hagerstown whispered that he wanted to see the expression on the piano teacher’s face when she heard Charlotte sing for the first time.

As expected, the pianist grinned broadly as soon as Charlotte filled the room with booming, operatic strains.

“She’s just terrific!” Mr. McFarland marveled. “We have so much talent here. It’s amazing.”

The after-school private lesson is just one example of the many ways the arts have sprung to life at St. Maria Goretti ever since Washington County’s only Catholic high school partnered with the Cumberland Valley School of Music (CVSM) last year.

The arts had suffered a setback several years ago when a decline in enrollment led to some cuts. But at the same time enrollment rebounded, St. Maria Goretti partnered with CVSM to provide students the most comprehensive arts education ever offered at the coeducational school.

St. Maria Goretti now offers an innovative introduction to music class that includes a “music in action” component drawing professional musicians to the class twice a week. The guest musicians include the area’s top cellists, flautists, percussionists, jazz musicians, conductors and others, who visit the school for the elective class that satisfies the school’s arts credit requirement.

With the help of CVSM, which is based in Chambersburg, Penn., the school’s annual musical has been revived. CVSM provides a music director, choral director and

choreographer for the song-and-dance extravaganza. A student choir that provides liturgical music in four-part harmony at school Masses was also introduced last year, as was a dance program that covers ballet, jazz and modern dance. Other new groups at the school include a string ensemble, a jazz ensemble and private after-school voice and instrument lessons.

"We are able to draw on the best, most-talented musicians in our area," said Andrew Sussman, CVSM executive director.

Mr. Sussman, who has a daughter enrolled at St. Maria Goretti, said CVSM has 54 instructors on its faculty. In addition to St. Maria Goretti, CVSM provides instruction at several other high schools and Wilson College in Chambersburg.

Charlotte said she has benefited by the expertise of the CVSM teachers. The music program was a major reason she decided to attend St. Maria Goretti, Charlotte said.

"Music has always been a big part of my life," she said. "I can't go a day without singing."

The renewed focus on the arts has helped some students "break out of their shells," according to Mr. McFarlane. It helps students have a more well-rounded educational experience, he said.

Students from St. Maria Goretti's arts program will present their first-ever performing arts concert of music and dance concert at Beaver Creek Country Club in Hagerstown on Dec. 2 at 2 p.m... Admission is \$5. Call 717-261-1220 for more information.