

Faith formation class focuses on children with special needs

Fifth in a Series



The October 2017 issue of the Catholic Review magazine explored the theme of “Positively Catholic” through Education, Health Care, Parish Life and Service. Each Review issue in 2019 will explore one of those aspects of being “Positively Catholic.”

HALETHORPE – One faith formation class at the Catholic Community of Ascension and St. Augustine (CCASTA) in Halethorpe and Elkridge is anything but standard.

Come Sunday mornings, the upstairs of Ascension’s former school building (now its parish center) fills with students with special needs, getting one-on-one attention from teenaged mentors.

The students, ranging in age 5 to 56, have special needs that include Down syndrome, autism, Williams syndrome, learning disabilities and blindness.

The program, near the end of its fifth year, bustles with 16 students learning from 23 teen mentors. While other parishes have faith formation for those with special needs, CCASTA’s teen mentors make it a little different.

Most students are parishioners of CCASTA, with some from neighboring Our Lady of Perpetual Help in Ellicott City, but it is open to any parish.

“I just feel like they deserve to have sacraments and a relationship with Jesus like

everyone else,” said Michele Poligardo, the CCASTA administrator for religious education. “These students with special needs are encountering Jesus through their teens (mentors) and through the acceptance and love they find in this program, and that’s what religious education should be – a way for our students to encounter a loving, forgiving God.”

In addition to being a catechist, Poligardo is no stranger to special education, having spent 13 years as a one-on-one aide and paraeducator in the Howard County Public School System.

When Cathy Carlin, director of family faith formation, read “How to Welcome, Include, and Catechize Children with Autism and Other Special Needs” by Lawrence R. Sutton – a deacon of the Diocese of Pittsburgh and psychologist specializing in autism – she asked Poligardo to start a program at CCASTA like the one outlined in the book.

Father John A. Williamson, pastor, said the ministry is “essential to evangelization,” and credits the dedication of its leadership and the teen mentors.

“I’m inspired by it (the ministry) every time I’m over there with them,” he said. “It’s what being a missionary disciple is all about.”

He said many of the families raising a child with special needs “live on the fringes,” as parishes are not equipped to minister to all of them. “Shouldn’t we,” Father Williamson said, “as the church community, be trying to support that, rather than add to that?”

Before individualized instruction begins, mentors and students (with their parents) gather in a circle of couches and chairs. One student might tell a joke; another jumps to the center to do a dance.

The space doubles as a lounge for waiting parents, who have formed their own support community.

Students, with their mentors, move to classrooms for individualized instruction. All students move at their own pace; Poligardo tracks the lessons.

Michelle Kirby's son, Danny, has been in the program since its inception. Now a fifth-grader, he has received the sacraments of first Communion and reconciliation.

"I always worried about how he would do with religious education - would it be appropriate for him?" Kirby said. "Having the one-on-one support with the teen mentors - who are absolutely fabulous - has just been a great experience for him. He loves coming to religious education - it's one of the highlights of his weekend."

Danny's mentor is Mary Margaret Galvin, 17, a CCASTA parishioner and senior at Notre Dame Preparatory School in Towson, who said, "His confidence has grown a lot in the past couple years."

"You can think outside the box," she said, adding that she's gained an understanding that one thing may not work for everybody.

Students range from being verbal to nonverbal. Being nonverbal, Poligardo said, does not necessarily mean that a person is incapable of understanding that the Eucharist is Jesus' body.

At first, she taught the class as mentors assisted students. At the urging of the mentors, however, she stepped back.

"I expected to see normal teen growth," she said. "I didn't expect to see the amount of growth I see in my teenagers. ... They take ownership not just of the lessons, but of their kids."

Carolina McLaughlin, 18, has stayed with the program all four years of high school - the norm for teen mentors who join as freshmen.

"I thought it was important because they can't always get the one-on-one attention they need," said McLaughlin, a senior at Howard High School.

She works with Ryan, who enjoys watching videos and sensory activities that keep him focused. Nervous at first, she has grown confident and noticed Ryan's improvement in becoming more verbal and making more eye contact - things that she calls "little victories."

“It really makes everything worth it,” she said. “The connection with him is so strong and it’s amazing to watch him learn.”

All of Teresa Whitaker’s three children have been involved in CCASTA’s special needs faith formation program – two as mentors and one as a student. Her youngest, Owen, in eighth grade, received his first Communion and reconciliation through the program in fourth grade and next year will prepare for his confirmation. Previously, he was in traditional religious education classes.

“Every week it was a struggle,” Whitaker said. “Eventually, we had to pull him out.”

Her older children, Sam, a sophomore at the University of Colorado, and Anna, a junior at Howard High School, have been mentors in the program.

“They’ve both gotten something out of it,” Whitaker said. “It’s just amazing for this (program) to continue to develop their own faith because they’re sharing it with someone else.”

Both, she said, have the gift of being able to work with people with special needs.

“I saw that my younger brother was really benefitting from it,” Anna Whitaker said. “I hope more people will join. ... I hope it will continue to grow and people will keep benefitting from it.”

She works with Peyton, a little girl she described as a “charmer,” who enjoys making crafts so she has something to bring home to show her family.

“I think I’ll always remember how good it feels when I know I’m getting through,” Anna Whitaker said.

*Read more “Positively Catholic” stories **here**.*