

Girl depicted in statue says Polish pope changed her life

By George P. Matysek Jr.

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As Melissa Brent crept closer to the 7-foot, 850-pound bronze statue, not even a steady late-November rain could dampen her joy.

Casting her eyes for the first time on the grand figure of Pope John Paul II embracing two children, Ms. Brent grinned and focused her attention on the smiling little girl whose arms are wrapped tightly around the pontiff's waist.

"Oh my!" exclaimed the 21-year-old parishioner of West Baltimore's St. Pius V in Harlem Park, stretching her neck to examine the artwork more closely as cold rain drops bounced off its shiny surface.

"Oh my gosh," she said. "I actually want to start tearing up right now. The face is exactly how I looked that day."

The statue, located in the recently-unveiled Pope John Paul II Prayer Garden in downtown Baltimore, depicts the moment when the Polish pope hugged the then-7-year-old Ms. Brent and a local boy after they gave him a welcoming gift of Black-eyed Susans at Baltimore-Washington International Thurgood Marshall Airport Oct. 8, 1995.

For Ms. Brent, a third-year nursing student at the University of Maryland at Baltimore, the encounter wasn't just ceremonial. It was life changing.

Ms. Brent calls the pope one of her most important spiritual influences and the man she turns to first when she needs a heavenly intercessor.

Back when she was a third-grader at St. William of York School in Baltimore and selected to greet the pope, Ms. Brent didn't fully realize the pontiff's importance.

“He took us both in his arms,” Ms. Brent said, recalling that the Holy Father also gently kissed her on the forehead. “I wasn’t expecting it, and I just started hugging right back. I felt warm and comfortable and there was a calm.”

When she was having a hard time getting into nursing school, her mother, Jean, encouraged Ms. Brent to pray to the late pope for guidance. She is convinced the pope helped get her into nursing school where she is now earning all As and Bs.

Raised in a family filled with people devoted to service – her uncle is a Josephite priest and other relatives include a doctor, teachers and nurses – Ms. Brent knew she wanted to devote her life to others.

“Whenever I have a difficult decision, he’s the first person I go to and ask for help,” said Ms. Brent, an active volunteer in her parish’s young adult program. “I’ve just had blessings – one after another.”

Ms. Brent is considering entering the U.S. Air Force after graduation. She would like to use her nursing skills, she said, “to help my fellow countrymen.”

“I definitely have been praying to him a lot about it,” she said. “I want him to show me the way to go and to guide me so I’ll make the right decision. He never lets me down.”

Convinced that Pope John Paul II will one day be recognized as a saint, Ms. Brent said she admires the pontiff for being able to relate to people of all cultures and backgrounds.

Ms. Brent treasures an ivory-colored rosary given to her by the pope, and she keeps it on her desk in her room. Her family home outside Columbia is filled with photos of her papal meeting and the former altar server also saves scrapbooks with newspaper clippings of the historic day.

Calling it “overwhelming” to be depicted in bronze in the middle of a major city, Ms. Brent praised Baltimore sculptor Joseph Sheppard for capturing the essence of that visit.

“It shows the overall peacefulness of that moment,” she said. “I look forward to the

day when I can take my kids and grandkids to see it. I'll be able to say, 'See, it really did happen.'"