

Hagerstown Blue Ribbon involves multi-generational commitment

HAGERSTOWN – SMART Boards and WiFi in every classroom, a 1-to-1 computer system for middle-schoolers and 3-D printers are among the modern tools that helped St. Mary Catholic School become a National Blue Ribbon School of Excellence.

Family and faith traditions have also contributed mightily to the enduring power of the only Catholic parish school in Western Maryland.

That was evident Sept. 28, when the Washington County school celebrated the announcement that it – along with three others in the Archdiocese of Baltimore – had received the U.S. Department of Education’s highest honor.

Patricia McDermott, principal, coordinated an effort that acknowledged 215 students and 26 staff members, as well as parents, Father Ernest Cibelli, pastor, and Patti Jones, the president of the school board and a graduate.

Jones and her husband, Jeff, sent their three children to St. Mary Catholic School and then St. Maria Goretti High School. From oldest to youngest, they moved on to Bucknell University, The Catholic University of America and the University of Maryland.

Jones, who coaches cross country and track and field at St. Maria Goretti High, was asked to cite a lesson she learned at St. Mary Catholic School that applies to her life today.

“No matter what you are asked to do, whether it’s solve a problem or pick up a piece of paper on the floor, do it with a smile and 100 percent effort,” Jones said. “The sisters taught me that. Do that, and you’ll go far in life.”

Founded in 1874, St. Mary Catholic School was staffed for much of its existence by School Sisters of Notre Dame.

Sister Mary Corda Mullenix and Sister Aloysius Norman continue to reside in the convent atop the school. Both have been affiliated with St. Mary Catholic School since before its third floor, made possible by a gift from the Augusta Cearfoss family, was dedicated in 2002.

A Baltimore native, Sister Mary Aloysius helps Jeanie Stark with the pre-K 4-year-olds. Sister Mary Corda, meanwhile, volunteers at the school when she's not serving a local homeless shelter. The spry 91-year-old was in the class of 1944 at St. Mary, when its mission included grades 1-12.

They were among those recognized, to raucous applause from students, by McDermott during an assembly in Pangborn Hall. Fifth-grade teacher Lori Balog used the opportunity to snap a selfie with McDermott, with the entire student body in the background.

The entrance to every classroom includes a photo of the teacher and the proclamation "Read." Inside Mary Poffenberger's 4th-grade classroom are a wealth of geography displays and the perspective of a teacher who has spent pretty much all of her life in Catholic education, including 28 years as a teacher at St. Mary.

Poffenberger went to St. Maria Goretti High and Notre Dame of Maryland University. She was in the class of 1979 at St. Mary Catholic School, just like her mother, Dolores, who was in the high school's class of 1949, and the oldest of her two daughters, Alice, who was in the class of 2016.

"The sense of community and family has not changed," said Poffenberger, a parishioner of St. Ann, on the north side of the Hub City. "The physical plant is larger, and the technology is constantly changing."

In the front office, Cheryl Hammond keeps tabs on tuition and other bookkeeping matters. She is the eighth of nine children who attended the school at the insistence of their 94-year-old mother, Virginia Weaver, who for decades ran the rummage sale that continues as a school fundraiser.

In the corridor outside McDermott's office, decorations include a tribute to the girls'

basketball team that won a Washington County title last winter and a photo of Archbishop William E. Lori with Frank Mooney, a 2009 graduate who is now a first year theology student at St. Mary's Seminary and University in Baltimore.

Its Blue Ribbon application notes that "All grades participate in daily religion classes." A professional day Sept. 29 began with staff attending 8:30 a.m. Mass celebrated by Father Cibelli.

"I see parents and grandparents of students who went here themselves," said Father Cibelli, whose own formation includes St. Louis School in Clarksville, another National Blue Ribbon School of Excellence. "That's one of the things that contributes to its strength and success."

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Also see:

Hydes school students celebrate Blue Ribbon status