

High schools ‘go and make disciples’

Well-known for their solid academics and structured discipline, Catholic high schools across the Archdiocese of Baltimore are also engaged in a third mission, in effect for 2,000 years.

“Evangelization is the goal,” said Abigail Kibler, who served as a religion teacher at Archbishop Spalding High School in Severn for six years. “We’re not here just to teach them about the faith, but to help them be a member of Jesus Christ’s church.”

Her objective was clear; her adolescent students were less so, as she said, “There are those who bare their souls every time they come into the classroom, and those who you’re not sure what’s sticking and what’s not.”

Falling into the latter camp was Olivia Simmons, who in 2014 took Kibler’s seminar on God’s plan for the salvation of men through Jesus Christ.

While “very interactive in the class” and “a great student” with “sincerity of heart,” the then-unbaptized Simmons betrayed no indication “she was going through that personal conversion – that faith journey,” Kibler remembered.

Still waters run deep, apparently.

“The only time I had ever gone to church when I was younger was Christmas,” explained Simmons, who graduated in May, “but, maybe from movies, or from reading, I just started praying; I don’t know what brought it on.”

Her prayers were simple, she said, “petition and thanksgiving.”

At Spalding, after her years of Montessori and public schooling, Simmons learned more about religion, and how it could bolster her faith.

“I knew there was more than what I was just doing,” she said. “The way she (Kibler) taught religion was so different from anything I had experienced at Spalding or before. The way she explained it really made me understand the faith, and we

analyzed the Bible.

"I was going through some bullying, and I saw that class as my refuge. I looked forward to it every day."

After experiences that included school Masses where she sat "just really wanting the Eucharist, but not being able to participate," she made a matter-of-fact statement to her mother.

"I think it's time for me to be baptized," she said.

Simmons was received into the Catholic Church at the Easter Vigil in 2015. Worshiping at St. Mary in Annapolis and St. Elizabeth Ann Seton in Crofton, she has taken her faith to Brown University in Providence, R.I.

"It's what we prayed for every day before school, and after school, and in our own time when we prayed for our students," said Kibler, now the coordinator of discipleship formation for the archdiocese's Department of Evangelization. "In many ways, it's the best we could hope for - to see them embrace their faith journey in a personal way and a decisive way."

Sometimes, it's less a metamorphosis and more of a sudden, hard, push that puts a high-schooler on that path.

Ashley Schwartz, a senior at The John Carroll School in Bel Air, embraced faith in the face of her own mortality, accentuated by the March death of fellow student Joshua Hamer.

"Josh wasn't just a boy in the hallway to me; nor was he my best friend," Schwartz explained in a "profession of faith" she read to classmates before she was baptized in front of the entire school at an April 28 end-of-year Mass.

She didn't need a close personal relationship with Hamer, who died following a car accident, to be profoundly affected by his death.

"I went to the chapel after Josh's passing with absolutely no idea what I was doing there," she wrote. "I stood outside for probably 20 minutes before I actually worked

up the courage to go in.”

Although Schwartz wrote that she “didn’t know how to pray,” she went in and spoke to God. “It was on that day that I realized I wanted to be baptized and have a closer relationship with God,” she wrote. “There was this welcoming feeling when I was in the chapel and a sense of security.”

Schwartz’s baptism was administered by Father Matthew Buening, chaplain of the Newman Center at Towson University. The John Carroll School borrowed a portable baptistry from a nearby Protestant church to make the full-immersion version of the sacrament possible.

While Schwartz’s public baptism electrified the school, it had an even greater effect on the teen herself.

“As cliché as it sounds, after I was baptized, I felt refreshed and like a whole new person,” she said. “I had a glow to me.”