

# Southwest Baltimore girls excel in school with help of sponsors

Fifth-grader Morgan Jackson and Sister of Mercy Patricia Smith shared their favorite books while getting to know each other April 27 during Sponsor Appreciation Day at Sisters Academy of Baltimore.

Jackson's favorite was "Green Eggs and Ham" by Dr. Seuss; Sister Patricia's was "The Little Engine That Could" because at the end of the book readers discover that the engine is female.

Sister Patricia said it goes along with the mission of the tuition-free school for girls in grades five to eight, mostly from southwest Baltimore City, which "empowers its students to become agents of transformation in their families, communities and society," according to its mission statement.

"Our mission can be summed up in three words: educate, empower and transform," said School Sister of Notre Dame Delia Dowling in her welcome.

At the event, sponsors spent time with students, played games and saw the girls' work. The eighth-graders joined sponsors in the school's gathering space to honor Mary Catherine Bunting, who donated \$1 million to start the school's first-ever endowment fund.

"It's a wonderful mission," said Bunting, a parishioner of St. Vincent de Paul in Baltimore who has been part of the school since its beginning. "(The students) should have a chance just like I had a chance."

Bunting attended Mount St. Agnes School in Baltimore, Notre Dame Preparatory School in Towson and Maryvale Preparatory School in Lutherville before earning her nursing degree from Mercy Hospital. From there, she went on to provide general healthcare to residents of south Baltimore as a nurse practitioner.

Her donation will create four scholarships in perpetuity. At any given time, there will be four students - one each in grades five to eight - attending school with support

from the scholarship fund.

Sister Delia said the school hopes to increase its enrollment slightly, and to add new named and endowed scholarships. She said the school also hopes to increase its presence in southwest Baltimore through weekend programs.

Sisters Acadmy relies on sponsors to send students through the four-year program. After its completion, nearly all of the students go on to Catholic high schools; others go on to other independent or selective public high schools.

Sponsoring a student costs \$6,000 per year; spaces for students are limited to how many scholarships are available.

Mimi Frank has sponsored students with her family for five years. Her father, who she said was big on two things - education and being Catholic - had initiated the family's support for St. Ignatius Loyola Academy in Baltimore, which offers a similar program for boys.

When the family wanted to increase its support, Frank suggested they add sponsorships for girls at Sisters Academy.

"We tried to find something that was meaningful to us as a group," Frank said, adding that seeing the students thrive at the school is a tangible way to realize the difference a donation makes. "You can see it."

Four religious congregations - the School Sisters of Notre Dame, the Sisters of Bon Secours, the Sisters of Mercy and the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur - set out to create an elementary school in southwest Baltimore in the early 2000s. They ended up narrowing their focus to address a specific need when they concluded that young girls at the middle-school age would do well in a single-gender school.

Sister Patricia was on the leadership team that started the middle school in 2004.

"The Sisters of Mercy are very committed to the education of women and those who don't have all the resources that others might have," she said, adding that the students who apply and are invited to attend the school are talented and smart, and

would do well when given the attention.

She loves meeting students in fifth grade, such as Jackson, and seeing them transform into eighth-graders ready to move on to high school.

“We’re so connected, it’s like a second family,” Jackson said, adding that despite challenges at home, the school offers a place to connect with friends. “When you walk in here, you might be a little mad, but five or 10 minutes later, you’re happy.”

Eileen Copple, principal, said the admissions process is rigorous. The first factor in determining admission is income level and financial need. Following that, students’ report cards and recommendation letters are evaluated, and then the students are invited to attend a three-week program in July.

During the program, students are evaluated on their behavior, interactions and contributions, and in the subjects of language arts, reading and math. Then, invitations to enroll are extended.

All students and their parents are required to adhere to a pledge of nonviolence, in actions and in words.

“This school taught me how to grow in a lot of ways,” said eighth-grader MaKayla McCorry, who will attend the Institute of Notre Dame in Baltimore next year. “You’re surrounded by people who help you and tell you to never give up.”

*Email Emily Rosenthal at [erosenthal@CatholicReview.org](mailto:erosenthal@CatholicReview.org)*