

St. Margaret School Cheerleaders win bid to compete at national level



A team of 19 St. Margaret School cheerleaders, led by coach Leah Semanie, recently won top prize for the middle school division at the Cheerstarz Competition held at Harford Community College. (Courtesy Leah Semanie)

By Renée Newberry

St. Margaret School cheerleaders in Bel Air have more than winning cheers: The team has a winning attitude and spirit.

The team of 19 girls between grades six and eight, led by coach Leah Semanie, recently won top prize for the middle school division at the Cheerstarz Competition held at Harford Community College.

"What I'm most proud of is their camaraderie," said St. Margaret principal Madeleine Hobik.

Hobik explained, in addition to coming in first in their division at Cheerstarz, the team also won the Sportsmanship Trophy. "They're putting their Catholic Christian values into practice. They're not only speaking the Gospel but living it. They put their words into practice, as St. Francis preached."

Semanie said this is not the first year the team has won their division, but it is the first year they've received the High Score Award for achieving the highest score in the competition. That award won the girls a paid bid into the U.S. Final Cheerleading Competition this May in Virginia Beach, said the coach, something the girls are very excited about.

Semanie explained, "The paid bid means the team has no registration fee. They get to compete for free because of the High Score Award."

Semanie, who is new this year to coaching cheerleading at St. Margaret, said, "The bulk of the girls are in the sixth grade, so it's a lot of new kids."

A parishioner of St. Margaret Church for the past 23 years since she was an infant and her family moved to Bel Air, Semanie has previously coached club teams, which ranged in age from 5 to 15. She, herself, cheered at Seton Hall University in New Jersey.

"My two little cousins are students at St. Margaret," Semanie said, "and that's how I got looped into coaching the cheerleading team here."

Semanie said her parents are also members of the board and very involved in the church.

The move to coaching at St. Margaret, which has offered cheerleading as an extracurricular activity for more than 20 years, was well worth it: Semanie spoke of a group of dedicated girls who practice twice a week for competition and for their cheering at St. Margaret's JV and varsity basketball games, among other events, such as pep rallies during Catholic Schools Week and the John Carroll School's upcoming Hoops for Hearts basketball game.

One practice a week is after school at St. Margaret. The other practice is held on a Saturday or Sunday in Joppa at a rented gymnasium with a full competition floor, something St. Margaret does not have, Semanie said.

"The girls have definitely bonded," the coach said. "They've had bonding events and movie nights. It's nice to see kids that would not have necessarily been friends before become friends through this."

She added, "This group of girls is very special. They work very hard and come together as a team. That's very rare these days. It's difficult to get kids to work this hard. These girls are pretty exceptional."

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