

St. Catherine Academy fills a void for special needs children

By Dan Quinlan, Contributing Writer 04/02/2009

[✉ Email to a friend](#) [📄 Post a Comment](#) [🖨 Printer-friendly](#)

In a quiet corner of Fairfield, nestled between the Holy Cross Parish and Lake Mohegan, there is an oasis for special needs children, the Saint Catherine Academy.

On Tuesday mornings everyone at the academy is excited about the afternoon's weekly swim session at the Shehan Center. "Which grades get to swim? Is it a special lesson?" this correspondent asks school President Helen Burland, but before he can probe any further she responds, "Oh everybody swims: all grades, teachers, and staff...everybody, it's great!" Every week the entirety of the Saint Catherine community has the pool to themselves and takes the plunge together, one of many signs of congenial, almost familial, solidarity within this special needs school.

The academy was founded in 1999 by the Diocese of Bridgeport under the auspices of Bishop (now Cardinal) Edward Egan. Beginnings were humble, just one room and four students. During the past ten years Saint Catherine has increased its student body to twenty students aged 5-21 and its faculty to eight teachers, and has earned state certification. Most recently, in 2007, the academy moved into a new 6,000 sq. ft. facility on the grounds of the Holy Cross Parish. Bishop William Lori has fully embraced the work begun under his predecessor, by overseeing the expansion of a school which is an important part of the Catholic ministry. He even received the school's Halloween trick or treaters at the Catholic Center in Bridgeport. According to Dr. Margaret Dames, superintendent of the diocese's schools, "Saint Catherine Academy is able to provide a nurturing education to our most special children." Principal Sister Marilyn Muldoon, OSU added that the school is in part an outgrowth of the Church's pro-life position. Officially the state license specifies an educational mandate for intellectual disabilities. This term encompasses mental retardation and Down syndrome among others, some students have cerebral palsy, and as Sister Muldoon observes, "often a child with an intellectual disability has a physical disability." Given the broad definition of special needs the school emphasizes individual development and personalized curricula, in addition to the core program. This style is often a welcome option for both students and parents, President Burland stated, "We offer an alternative for school districts and parents who are not benefiting from the full inclusion model."

Students work through a typical regimen of mathematics, social studies, science, language arts, and religion; which is supplemented by more individually tailored programs in music, physical education, daily living skills, and vocational development. These last two endeavors are facilitated by a classroom styled as an apartment complete with kitchen, bathroom, bedroom, and living room. This setting allows students to work on cooking, cleaning, personal maintenance, and if they are lucky some Nintendo Wii. President Burland explained that prescribed routines are essential for students with special needs. Still, the hope is that prescriptions give way to generally applicable and creative skills. One measure of success in this area was the school's 'pop art' project inspired by the work of Andy Warhol. Community involvement and service is also encouraged. Every month students and teachers set up a veritable production line and prepare 250 peanut butter and jelly sandwiches for delivery to the Merton House in Bridgeport.

Parents have expressed tremendous approval and enthusiasm for Saint Catherine Academy. Sandra Calise-Cenatiempo of Weston has a daughter who has been enrolled at the school since its inception. Francesca is now sixteen and her mother has described her progress as magical. Diagnosed with Angelman syndrome she remains non-verbal, and had a short attention span and difficulty with social interactions during her younger years. However, her mother notes that Francesca has become calmer at home and even joins the family at the dinner table, which was previously quite uncommon. When asked about the value of the school

Calise-Cenatiempo said, "It's like a small family...I don't know what I would do if I didn't have it."

Other parents decided to switch to Saint Catherine after some experience in other school systems. Holly Flynn of Fairfield moved her son, Thomas, to the school three years ago. Thomas is also non-verbal, but his mother was pleased to report that in the past few years his communicative skills have improved considerably through both sign and intonation. Nancy Fontana of Redding also moved her daughter, Kelsey, to Saint Catherine Academy last year, after the public school system could no longer meet her child's needs. In regard to the change Fontana stated, "I wish I had done it earlier." She contended that Kelsey has learned and achieved more in one year at St. Catherine than in all her previous years of school combined. Kelsey enjoys the cooking and swimming lessons, and she has made many new friends. It is a stark contrast to the days when she and her aide were the sole occupants of a public school classroom.

Some independent researchers have also expressed praise for Saint Catherine Academy. Associate Professor Dorothy Stubbe, MD of the Yale University Child Study Center wrote in an email, "Saint Catherine Academy...utilize[s] an individualized and small group approach to helping each child or adolescent reach his or her potential. I have been impressed with the educational program and with student progress in the program."

Looking ahead President Burland is hoping to start an endowment for the school and is actively planning the annual gala, which will be held on Saturday, June 7 at the Barone Center of Fairfield University in honor of Bishop Lori. Burland and others have been pleased with the episcopal leadership over "this important ministry." Dr. Dames stated, "The gala is a big thank you to Bishop Lori, for being there all these years."

The positive fervor surrounding Saint Catherine Academy is a testament to its work, but also to the vitality and virtue of independent schools.

For more information about the school, volunteering, and the gala please visit www.stcatherineacademy.org or email President Helen Burland at Helen.Burland@diobptedu.org.