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# FAIRFIELD COUNTY Catholic



Students at Greenwich Catholic Elementary School fill boxes with donated goods which were shipped to the survivors of Hurricane Katrina along the Gulf Coast. (Photo by John Crowley)



## Saint Catherine Academy's second graduate

# Excited and happy about her job – not anxious!

By PAT HENNESSY

"Bishop Lori is coming to my graduation. That's awesome!" says Ashley Escobar with an enormous smile. "Can you believe how excited I am?"

The graduation ceremony attended by Bishop William Lori on June 10 at Holy Cross Parish in Fairfield has very special meaning. Saint Catherine Academy, the only Catholic special education school in the state, sent forth Ashley, only its second graduate in the school's 10-year history (pictured on the front cover of this newspaper).

"Most of the children who were with us in the beginning,

home; and helped make gift baskets at Bigelow Tea. She now works at Stamps and Stuff in Bridgeport.

"All the bosses like my work," Ashley says. "I love it. I'm an adult working with other adults."

"She's grown so much in the last couple of years," says Sister Eileen. "At first she was hesitant to talk to a boss or a supervisor unless I was there. Now she's completely confident. She doesn't need me anymore."

### Sacraments

Ashley made both her First Communion and Confirmation while at Saint Catherine's.

"Msgr. Gintoli is a friend of mine," says Ashley who, with her family, is a member of Assumption Parish in Fairfield where Msgr. Blase Gintoli is pastor. "I like religion and learning about God."

As Ashley moves into the wider world, Saint Catherine

Academy, too, is looking to the future. The school had its tenth-anniversary fundraising gala on June 7 at Fairfield University. Now, President Helen Burland is exploring a collaboration with Fairfield University and students from the Intellectual Disabilities Program in the Graduate School of Education.

"The program will allow us to share best practices, and may give some of our older students a chance for some on-campus experience," Burland explains.

At the same time, Saint Catherine's is reaching out to local public schools, both to assist their personnel in teaching children with special needs and to offer older students com-



"ALL THE BOSSES LIKE MY WORK," says Ashley Escobar, who graduates from Saint Catherine Academy on June 10. The only Catholic special education school in the state, Saint Catherine's has developed a vocational program to let students learn the type of work that best fits their skills and interests. At her first job, shown here, Ashley sorted files in the Human Resources department of the Catholic Center with the assistance of her vocational specialist, Sister Eileen Boffa.

(PHOTO BY PAT HENNESSY)

ing from public schools the chance for a robust vocational program with an emphasis on being as independent as their skills allow. "These are exciting times," Burland says.

Ashley Escobar is excited, too, as she faces her own future. "It's exciting, happy, fun," she says, bubbling over with joy.

Is this once-hesitant student anxious as she prepares to leave the protective environment of Saint Catherine's? Her grin grows wider than ever. "Anxious – NEVER!" insists Saint Catherine's newest graduate.

(For more information about the Catholic schools of the Diocese of Bridgeport, visit the new and improved website: [www.catholic-schools/fairfieldcounty.com](http://www.catholic-schools/fairfieldcounty.com).) ❖

*"Saint Catherine's has evolved into a middle/high school curriculum with an emphasis on independent living and vocational skills components."*

like Ashley, were eight years old or younger," recalls Sister Marilyn Muldoon, O.S.U., Saint Catherine's principal. "Now we've evolved into a middle/high school curriculum with an emphasis on independent living and vocational skills components."

### Room to Expand

Saint Catherine's celebrated the graduation of its first student, Michael Bepko, in 2007, shortly before moving from the Catholic Center in Bridgeport to its new home. The new building has more class space and room for additional computers, an art room, SMART-boards, increased vocational areas, and a separate apartment area for developing life skills.

With 20 students, Saint Catherine's supplies a curriculum tailored to each one's needs. "Our program is still growing," says Sister Eileen Boffa, R.S.M., vocational integration specialist. "It's helpful to try different jobs so we get an idea of what career will work for each individual student."

### Internships

Ashley, 21, exemplifies the potential of the new site, the advantages of both the academic and vocational components, and the religious enrichment possible in a Catholic school. She likes reading and art, but not math – although she has learned to count money. For the past few years she has enjoyed in particular the chance to intern in various job locations.

Her first job opportunity was in the Catholic Center, where she was employed filing records. She worked in the office of Notre Dame High School; in Marty's Pizza and Taco Loco restaurants, both in Bridgeport; assisted residents in a nursing