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Friends and classmates

Academy of Holy Cross welcomes two new students with Down syndrome

By Mark Zimmermann
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Theresa Brogan (second from right, top row) and Samantha Copeland (far left on bottom row) pose in the school courtyard with their friends on the first day of classes. (Foto/Jaclyn Lippelmann)

With the help of a grant and technical assistance from the Catholic Coalition for Special Education, the Academy of the Holy Cross is offering a modified inclusive academic program for young women with intellectual disabilities, resuming an inclusion program that the school had offered from 2000-09.

"We had two lovely ladies in the eighth grade in Catholic grade school who had no place to go," said Katy Prebble, the president of the Academy of the Holy Cross, who said resuming the program there fit the school's mission and was "the right thing to do."

Debbie Copeland, Samantha's mother, said that on the day when Holy Cross's acceptance letter arrived, "Our girls ran out to the mailbox. Samantha got her purple envelope, and she was so happy and excited."

Samantha Copeland was one of eight girls from her class who would be going to the academy together. Theresa Brogan and her family had also dreamed of her going on to Catholic high school. Even before Holy Cross announced that it would be re-establishing its inclusion program, Theresa toured and shadowed the school like her classmates at St. John the Evangelist did.

"After she visited Holy Cross, Katy Prebble called us and said she'd like to talk with us," said Mary Brogan, Theresa's mom.

Her five older siblings had all attended Catholic school, and when Theresa Brogan was born, her mother got a note from the principal at St. John the Evangelist School, Immaculate Heart of Mary Sister Kathleen Lannak, saying that the school

Theresa Brogan is 15 and the youngest of six children. She played CYO soccer with her classmates for all her years at St. John the Evangelist School in Silver Spring before graduating from the eighth grade there. She likes acting and cheerleading and using her iPad, and dreams of being a teacher someday.

Samantha Copeland, 16, has a younger brother and sister. She enjoys skiing in Colorado with her family, and although she admits that she's shy, she likes cheerleading, and she performed in several plays at Our Lady of Lourdes School in Bethesda before graduating there this past spring. She likes decorating, art and fashion.

Both girls are friends, and they are joining several of their friends and fellow graduates from their Catholic elementary schools, as they begin their freshman year at the Academy of the Holy Cross in Kensington. Theresa Brogan and Samantha Copeland have Down syndrome, and they are participating in the academy's Moreau Options Program.

On her first day of orientation as a Holy Cross freshman, Theresa Brogan said she was "excited and happy," a sentiment also expressed by her friend Samantha. "It's fun! It (Holy Cross) is big to me. I know people here, so I don't feel lost!" Theresa Brogan said, smiling.

would be ready for her. "True to her word, Teresa started there in preschool," Mary Brogan said.

After she received her acceptance letter to the Academy of the Holy Cross, Theresa Brogan got a text from one of her best friends at St. John the Evangelist School. "Did you get in?" the friend asked in the text. "Yes I got in. Did you?" answered Theresa, who proudly wore her new Holy Cross sweatshirt that spring.

As her first day at Holy Cross approached, Theresa was not nervous, her mother said. "She thinks she can do it. Part of that, I credit to her elementary school experience. She's accepted as one of the students there," said Mary Brogan.

Debbie Copeland said that Samantha was also excited about coming to school at Holy Cross. "She's a very determined person, which helps her a lot at school," she said of her daughter. And she added that Samantha, like many other teen girls, "definitely has her own mind about things."

At Our Lady of Lourdes School, Samantha had acted in Annie and Mary Poppins. "This last year, we did The Sound of Music, and she was one of the nuns," said her mother. "Samantha wants to try everything," she added, noting that her daughter has also done horseback riding and participated in cross country.

Now the two girls have another adventure ahead, as new students at the Academy of the Holy Cross, and their friends from their Catholic elementary schools are happy to be with them again.

"It's pretty cool. We get to hang out again," said Mary Muldoon, who graduated from St. John the Evangelist School with Theresa Brogan. "It means a lot. It'll be really fun. We have study hall (together) tomorrow."

That sentiment was shared by Gabriella Sebastian, who said of Samantha, her fellow Lourdes graduate, "It's awesome. I love her! If she wasn't here, it wouldn't be the same." Their Lourdes and Holy Cross classmate Helena Orrego added, "It's fun. You're in a new environment, but with the same friends. You meet new people, too."

Mary Brogan said that her daughter Theresa, when asked what she was looking forward to about Holy Cross, said, "I want to make new friends and learn new things."

The proud mother said she and her husband have stressed the importance of getting a good education to all six of their children. "You try to widen the world for your kids, and let them see the possibilities," she said.

And after watching her older siblings all graduate from Catholic school, Theresa Brogan had that same dream, her mother said, adding that experience has been valuable for her, and her classmates.

"I do think that her experience has made concrete for her, her own place in the Body of Christ, that she too has been given gifts to serve Him through her friends and her classmates and her family," Mary Brogan said. "She has felt respected, valued and deeply loved as a member of her faith community."

Francesca Pellegrino, the president of the Catholic Coalition for Special Education, said her group was happy to support the Moreau Options Program at Holy Cross. "Many parish schools are serving students with special needs, and there is a burgeoning group of students who will need a Catholic high school to call home. So seeing the Academy of the Holy Cross offer the opportunity to continue their education in a Catholic high school is very encouraging," she said.

The coalition has supported inclusion programs at 24 Catholic schools in Washington, D.C., and Maryland, and more than 5,000 families, parents and teachers since it was founded 10 years ago.

Maggie Hubbard, the director for special education for the Catholic Schools Office of the Archdiocese of Washington, said all local Catholic schools accept students with special needs, with many serving students who are on the autism spectrum. Presently four schools in the archdiocese, including the Academy of the Holy Cross, have students with intellectual disabilities enrolled, she said.

"For years now, there have been archdiocesan elementary schools that accept students with intellectual disabilities such as Down syndrome and that number is growing," Hubbard said. "It is wonderful when high schools recognize the importance of offering these students the opportunity to continue their Catholic education, where they can grow into the adults God intends for them to be."

Both Katy Prebble, Holy Cross's president, and Emily Montgomery, the director of the Moreau Options Program there, said the inclusion program reflects the vision of Blessed Basil Moreau, the French priest who founded the Congregation of the Holy Cross, and who believed in the importance of educating not only students' minds, but also their hearts.

"The two girls that we have now, and the girls who follow in their footsteps, they'll get the same opportunities other young ladies have, to grow and to become women of courage, compassion and scholarship. They will receive the same benefits of a Christ-centered education," said Montgomery, who noted that Theresa and Samantha will take the majority of their classes with classmates, sometimes with support. Their classes this year will include math, English, theology, health, art

and dance.

Their classmates will learn a lot too, Montgomery said. "They benefit in many ways. They learn to value all people God created."

Montgomery, who has more than 20 years experience in special education, ranging from work with preschool students to adults, is impressed with her new students, Theresa Brogan and Samantha Copeland. "They both have an amazing generosity of spirit. As far as scholarship, both these girls work incredibly hard," she said. "They're committed to doing the very best they can do. Any community would be lucky to have them. I'm glad we were the lucky ones who won that lottery, so to speak."

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