



# ALL ARE WELCOME

BY ERIK ZYGMONT

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In welcoming a first-grader and third-grader with Down syndrome on its first day, Aug. 29, St. Louis School in Clarksville lifted up not only the two new students but all of their peers, said Francesca Pellegrino.

"I think something people don't realize is (that) children with disabilities have a remarkable gift for transforming others," said Pellegrino, president and founder of the Catholic Coalition for Special Education.

Her evidence is her own son, now 24, who inspired her passion for helping numerous Catholic schools in the Washington and Baltimore archdioceses, including St. Louis, open their doors to children with disabilities.

He has also nurtured her faith.

"My son has brought me to closer to God," she said. "The challenges he's had ... made me a better individual."

It's never too early, Pellegrino argues, to inspire children to work toward the common good.

"When children with disabilities are in the classroom, the other children learn to recognize them as more similar to them than different," she said.

Pellegrino has seen it happen.

She remembered setting up a play-date for her son and the daughter of a former colleague.

"I said to (the mother), 'Just tell your daughter that Alex has a disability, so she's prepared,'" she recalled.

Some time later, the mother reported that her daughter had befriended a

mentary school at St. Louis, and Kathryn has two older sisters and a younger brother currently at the school.

"It's nice to have everyone in the same place, and she is so excited to be going to school with her sisters, because she didn't get to last year," said Matt Rosewag, Kathryn's father.

A CCSE grant allowed St. Louis to hire the additional staff necessary to serve Kathryn and Ory.

"I really felt that they and their families needed to be a full part of our community," said Terry Weiss, the school's principal, who echoed Pellegrino's take on inclusion. "I think we're going to learn more from these two little ones than they could ever learn from us."

Archbishop William E. Lori was at St. Louis for the first day, and he, too, looked to



KEVIN J. PARKS | CR STAFF

Excited and ready to learn at St. Louis School in Clarksville, Kathryn Rosewag, center, is escorted by her sister Brooke, right, and Katherine Steir Aug. 29.

classmate with cerebral palsy.

"That was because of the experience she had with my son," said Pellegrino, a resident of Washington, where she has been a parishioner of the Shrine of the Most Blessed Sacrament since 1984.

Kathryn Rosewag and Ory Docal, the two new students at St. Louis, grinned as they climbed the stairs to the school's main entrance and a warm welcome.

Ory's three sisters completed ele-

the common good.

"You're making up your mind to love one another," he told the students. "When you love your classmates, and you love your teachers, and there's a great spirit of cooperation, you'll wake up every morning and say, 'I can't wait to get to school,' because you'll love it." •



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