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## Catholic Coalition for Special Education helps open Catholic school doors to children with special needs

Kelly Sankowski Friday, November 03, 2017 3:50 PM Like 45 Tweet Comments (0)

Soon after Bridget Shute's son, Andrew, was born with Down syndrome, she reached out to the Catholic Coalition for Special Education (CCSE) and started having conversations with Francesca Pellegrino, the organization's founder, about how to give her son the same sort of Catholic education that she had received, and was planning to give her other children.

"I wanted [Andrew] to be raised in the faith like the rest of my kids," said Shute. "Catholic schools form the whole person...it is not just about test scores or your brain, it is about who you are."

Pellegrino founded CCSE after going through the process of trying to provide faith formation for her own son with disabilities, and seeing a need to advocate for greater inclusion in parishes and schools. Now, part of what she does is meet with parents who have a pre-natal diagnosis or a newborn child with disabilities to provide spiritual and practical support as they navigate how to help their child.

"You take what God blesses you with and you say, 'Okay God, what now?'" Pellegrino said, reflecting on raising a kid with special needs. "It is wonderful when you find a school that has the same openness to all children," she added.

Pellegrino became a close friend and mentor to Shute, who said that she and other people that she met through CCSE helped her family by giving suggestions and just listening to them. After meeting Maggie Hubbard, a former teacher at St. Mary of the Mills in Laurel who is now the director for special education for the Archdiocese of Washington, the Shute family began to plan for Andrew to attend St. Mary of the Mills - which is also the school his mom went to for elementary school.

Shute also graduated from St. Vincent Pallotti High School, located across the street from St. Mary of the Mills, and grew up in a house about five minutes away, which she now lives in with her husband and three kids. Especially after her oldest son, William, started attending St. Mary of the Mills School, it was important for Shute to give Andrew the same opportunity as the rest of the family.

"I wanted him to go to school with his siblings. I want him to have the typical experience his siblings have," said Shute. "We don't live in an isolated world, so he shouldn't have an isolated experience."

When she started talking to teachers and administrators at St. Mary of the Mills, she said, "Everyone was on the same page" that accepting Andrew into the school was the right thing to do. They just had to figure out how to do it.

For preschool, Andrew attended the Francis Fuches Early Childhood Center, and was able to be partially included in the typical preschool class. However, if Andrew had continued in the public school system, their only option would have been to place Andrew in a self-contained classroom only with other students who have disabilities, doing a completely different curriculum than other peers his age. He would not have had any interaction with his peers in a typical classroom, Shute said.



CS PHOTOS BY JACLYN LIPPELMANN Andrew Shute, a kindergarten student with Down syndrome at St. Mary of the Mills School in Laurel, sits with his one-on-one teacher, Angie Holmes, in his classroom.

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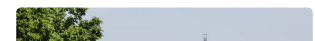
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So, when the principal and resource leader at St. Mary of the Mills gave Shute the final 'yes,' accepting Andrew into St. Mary of the Mills School, Shute said it was an incredible moment.

"I really feel like it is true inclusion," said Shute. "Everyone has something they're really strong in and really weak in. I know he has some more extra stuff, but he also brings a lot."

Now, at St. Mary of the Mills, Andrew gets to be included in a class with all of the other kindergarten students. Last year, Andrew did half-days in kindergarten to help him get acclimated to life in school, and now attends St. Mary of the Mills for a full school day and has a teacher dedicated to giving him one-on-one support, which is funded by a grant that the school received from CCSE this year.

St. Mary of the Mills is one of four schools to receive this type of grant this year, with the others being Holy Redeemer School in Kensington, St. Louis School in Clarksville, and the Academy of the Holy Cross in Kensington. Altogether, this year's grants total \$85,000. Since its founding in 2004, CCSE has given nearly one million dollars in grants to Catholic schools in the Washington and Baltimore archdioceses.

"We are every proud to have supported St. Mary's this year," said Pellegrino. "They have a long history of being inclusive in the parish and the school, and we're happy to help them take this new step."

Tiffani James, the assistant principal of the school, noted that they believe that Catholic education should be accessible to everyone, even at a small parish school like theirs.

"If this is what you want, we want you here," said James.

The school also includes several other students with learning disabilities, who James said they are happy to have there. But there is a point they reach where "we need help doing what we do well," she said, and the grant from CCSE helped them do that by paying for Andrew's one-to-one instruction and taking some of the financial pressure off of the rest of the school. St. Mary of the Mills does not charge any additional tuition for the inclusion program.

In addition to grants to schools and support for parents, CCSE also gives schools technical assistance, holds professional development workshops, and offers some tuition assistance for teachers who wish to study special education. Alisha Jordan, the school's principal, noted that these are all important pieces "to make sure the child can be successful."

Angie Holmes, Andrew's one-on-one instructor, said she has seen a lot of growth in Andrew between last year and today.

"Last year he participated a little with the group, but he was shy," she said. This year, she added, he is happy to interact with his classmates and has become "part of the culture of the class."

Holmes greets Andrew in the morning, guides him through his morning routine, helps to redirect him when he gets off task, takes him for breaks when he needs them, and oversees his transitions. In the classroom, he is expected to work and behave like everyone else, just with a few extra accommodations and breaks along the way. The kindergarten teacher, Chris Brant, spent time over the summer creating special materials for Andrew that meet the curriculum goals but are more user-friendly for him.

Just as Mother Teresa said she saw God in the poor, Shute says she sees God in people who have disabilities.

"There is a purity and a love [in them]," she said. "Andrew has this ability to draw people in and touch them."

Shute said this figuratively, but she also mentioned how Andrew literally will give big hugs, and at the sign of peace at Church likes to kiss people's hands.

"I do feel like he's a gift," said Shute. "God is trusting us with him."

After Andrew continues to grow in the St. Mary of the Mills community, he will eventually need a place to go to high school, Pellegrino noted. But while there are several high schools with programs for students with special needs such as learning disabilities, AD/HD and high-functioning autism spectrum disorders, so far Holy Cross – an all-girls' school – is the only high school in the Archdiocese of Washington that has students with intellectual disabilities enrolled in the school. In order for Andrew to have a Catholic high school to attend in the archdiocese, a co-ed or all-boys' school would need to begin a similar inclusion program. Shute said it would be great if all of her kids, who are each about 20 months apart, could attend the same high school.



"I've been pro-life my whole life," said Shute. "I recognize...if we're going to be pro-life, we need to be more than pro-birth. It's a journey and as Catholics I think we need to be on board with the journey. This [inclusion program] is one thing we need to put in place."

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Soon after Andrew Shute was born with Down syndrome, his mom reached out to the Catholic Coalition for Special Education (CCSE) and started talking about how to give her son a Catholic education. Now, Andrew is in Kindergarten at St. Mary of the Mills School in Laurel, and thanks to a grant from CCSE, he receives one-on-one instruction every day. #ADWSchools

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