

CATHOLIC SCHOOLS WEEK

LEARN. SERVE. LEAD. SUCCEED.



Photo by James A. McBride

Claire Velte and more than a dozen other elementary and high school students write about their own experiences and views on Catholic education.

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Tuesday, February 27th
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Tuesday, March 13th
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Wednesday, February 7, 2018
Thursday, February 15, 2018
Tuesday, February 20, 2018
Friday, February 23, 2018

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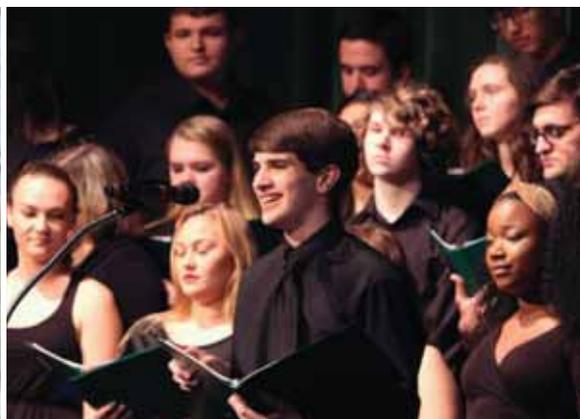

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RSVP www.camdencatholic.org/admissionsevents
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**CAMDEN CATHOLIC
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Photo by Alan M. Dumoff

LEARN. SERVE. LEAD. SUCCEED. — Kindergarten students work at tables in Bishop Schad Regional Grammar School, Vineland, on Jan. 18. This year's theme is Catholic Schools: Learn. Serve. Lead. Succeed.

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No gift could be better than a Catholic education

By AJ Fucci
Cape Trinity Regional Catholic School, North Wildwood

I have received many gifts in my short life, but nothing will ever exceed the education I am currently receiving. My school has taught me many character and life building skills. We have journeyed through so many experiences as a class and as a school. My class has gone to visit seniors, participated in sports, and has made our education as Catholics a priority.

In seventh grade we would take a trip down the street to the North Wildwood Recreation Center. Every day the senior citizens of the surrounding communities gather to do small activities. Many elderly people are lonely because their kids are grown up, or their spouse has passed. This center gives them the chance to enjoy each other's presence, feel like part of a community. When we arrive at the center the atmosphere seems lighter and more uplifting. Their happiness in seeing us is just so amazingly powerful. They are more engaging and animated when you converse with them. This experience taught me that life is short, and we have to take every opportunity to make ourselves the best person we can be.



AJ FUCCI WITH HIS PARENTS, ERIN AND ANTHONY FUCCI

Basketball, baseball, soccer, softball, cross country and cheer leading are all sports that our school hosts. I myself participate in soccer and basketball. When our team has basketball practice, we run as a team, do plays as a team

and act like a team. One night at practice we were running drills the best we had since the start of practices. Suddenly our coaches started cheering and getting excited. I didn't realize what they saw until later. I figured out

that they saw a team. They saw a team that they knew was going to succeed. From this I learned that teamwork is very important in life, and being a good teammate is a skill everyone should have.

The Catholic religion can be very complex. So it is especially important to have an education for it. Every day my class has a religion class at the end of the day. This class is very different than all of my other classes. This class requires my full belief and devotion. As a class we navigate our religion and learn all of the aspects of it. For example, in class we were learning about the Ten Commandments. I noticed that the Commandments were a group, but also each had its own identity. This was the first time I realized that we are learning more than just a few sentences. We are learning why these sentences exist.

Although I have not been alive very long, I still can predict the effects of a Catholic education. My father went to Catholic school, and his education has guided him to be the director of the Marianist Family Retreat Center. When I see this, it gives me insight to what might be in store for me in the future. Only if it's visiting senior citizens or participating in sports, it's still the start to an amazing journey ahead.

A teacher and principal who pushed me to do my best

By Brianna Marcelin
Assumption Regional Catholic School, Galloway

John J. Convey of The Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C., reports that 99 percent of students who attend a Catholic high school graduate. I firmly believe this is because the students have someone to push them to reach for the stars and dig for more. Catholic school children learn how to be devoted and selfless because their school leaders encourage them to set goals for themselves academically, spiritually and personally.



BRIANNA MARCELIN

The academic leaders who pushed me to do my best were Thomas and Mary Ellen Schurtz. I would not have had such valuable experiences if I did not have my Catholic school education.

After retiring from teaching high school, Thomas Schurtz was a literature teacher at Assumption Regional

As I stood at her funeral in July 2017, I realized that her presence made me who I am today.

Catholic School for another 10 years before again retiring. Mr. Schurtz knew how to capture each student's attention with his goofy personality and he pushed us to dive deeper into every novel and assignment. He taught me how to think. He was the hardest on his students, yet was still everyone's "favorite." His extraordinary, sometimes unbelievable, stories captivated each of us and drilled his lesson home, especially while often noting, "You're entitled to my opinion."

He and his wife shared many characteristics, especially their love for their Catholic school, but one identical characteristic shone through: they were warriors, in every sense of the word.

Mary Ellen Schurtz was the principal of Assumption Regional Catholic School for eight years after teaching there for 18 years. Mrs. Schurtz was

the best principal I could ever imagine. Every day, her radiant smile would be the first thing students saw while walking into school. She stood with this smile even while fighting her own battle. In 2013, Mary Ellen Schurtz was diagnosed with breast cancer. She didn't let anyone know how she was feeling; she never showed her pain. Her illness never stopped her from being a role model.

As I stood at her funeral in July 2017, I realized that her presence made me who I am today. Through her battle with cancer, she remained poised, calm, faithful, caring and, most importantly, present. Even through the worst, she fought and remained faithful in everything she did. Through her faithfulness and strength in Christ, she became a model to all students at our school. She was an example for all of



MARY ELLEN AND THOMAS SCHURTZ

us, especially us girls. She taught me how to be the woman I wanted to be, and her connection to Catholic school gave her the opportunity to do so.

My parents gave me the gift of a Catholic education at the age of 4 without knowing Mr. and Mrs. Schurtz would have this effect on me. Now, as an eighth grader, I know how confidently I can go to high school, presenting myself as a young woman of faith, intelligence and assuredness. Thomas and Mary Ellen Schurtz were the experience, what Catholic education is meant to be. To me they were more than that; they were my gift of a lifetime, a gift I could only receive through a Catholic education.

Fleeing Egypt, and learning to choose joy

By Jennifer Alemian
Gloucester Catholic High School

My life wouldn't be the same without Catholic education. It has been more than a privilege to attend Catholic School for most of my life and to earn an education some individuals would dream of having. Catholicism has always been a part of my life and who I am.

I was born in Cairo, Egypt and lived there for about 11 years. My immediate family moved to New Jersey in 2011 due to the Egyptian Revolution, which was when the Muslim Brotherhood took power in Egypt. It was extremely dangerous, especially for Christians.

While I lived in Egypt I attended Sacre Coeur de Heliopolis, which was an all-girls school that is a combination of a Catholic school and a Muslim school. Every week Catholics would all, as a school, go to Mass, while Muslims went to class to learn about their religion. It was an experience that taught me many lessons, for example, respecting cultural differences and diversification.

Moving to New Jersey was a very difficult chapter in my life. I had to make new friends, learn how to speak English, and I wanted to fit in with the crowd. Although it was a difficult chapter in my life, it made me learn that God has a plan for everyone. Middle school and high school shaped me into the person I am today.

I was always scared to go to high school, but I knew I'd be comfortable when choosing Gloucester Catholic. I

went through a lot throughout sophomore year and I was in need of someone to guide me and help me through it. Ms. Heeder, my sophomore religion teacher, helped me through my struggles every single day. She was the shoulder to cry on when I needed it. Whenever she realized I was upset or having a bad day, she would give me a bracelet to wear for the day that said, "Choose Joy." Ms. Heeder taught me how to have open arms for everyone and to be welcoming.

Gloucester Catholic gave me so many opportunities, for example, Kairos. Kairos, a three-day Catholic retreat program, taught me many lessons. Through Kairos, I realized that I am not alone. I got to know different types of people and their experiences on a new level. My relationship with God grew stronger everyday throughout the retreat. I got to talk to God through nature walks and long talks with amazing people.

I got an unexpected letter from someone during Kairos. When I opened the envelope, a bracelet was attached to the letter and it said, "Choose Joy." I immediately had tears of joy when realizing it was from Ms. Heeder. Ever since Kairos, I've been going to church every Sunday and started praying more. I appreciate the gift of life and Catholic education more than I ever had. I learn something new every single day, whether it's learning more about my Catholic faith, or life lessons. I thank God every single day because of the best gift I could ask for, my Catholic education.



JENNIFER ALEMIAN

Catholic school is 'the place for me to grow'

By Maggie McMahon
Bishop McHugh Regional School,
Cape May Court House

When you think of a gift, you may think of a material item: the newest clothing item, a new Xbox or Play Station. But there are gifts that are more than just material items; for example: happiness, love or our education. These gifts are more important than any material item, but they often get sidelined. My gift of a Catholic education is a gift of a lifetime, and it has taught me how to use my spiritual virtues.

For the last nine years of my life, I have attended Bishop McHugh Regional Catholic School. But it wasn't



MAGGIE
MCMAHON

always set in stone that I was going to a Catholic school. In fact, nine years ago, sending me to a Catholic school was more of a wish than a reality for my parents. Originally, the plan was for me to attend Saint Augustine Catholic School in Ocean City, but that plan was ended when the school closed.

At the that time, Upper Township Public School seemed to be the only option. It was a great school, but my parents really wanted to put my sisters and me through Catholic school, just like their parents had done for them years ago.

Soon my parents discovered Bishop McHugh through a friend, and from

that point on, my parents knew that this was the place for me to grow.

In my nine years in Catholic education, I've excelled in academics, athletics and leadership. I've been instructed to strive to live like Jesus — in compassion, hope and love.

At the beginning of this year I was really struggling in my math class. I am taking Algebra 1, and I was really struggling. I was getting grades that weren't what I wanted to get. I turned to my teacher for help. She took time out of her busy schedule to help me, and soon I was doing much better. Thanks to my teacher, I'm now getting the grades I expect from myself and

I've been instructed to strive to live like
Jesus — in compassion, hope and love.

am feeling so much more confident. At a public school, I might not have been able to get the help I needed from the teachers because they have so many students to teach and not enough time for one-on-one attention. In the future, I'll look back on this as a gift.

In the future, I'll be able to apply for any job I desire because I'll be so prepared. Not only will I be prepared academically, but also spiritually. By receiving a Catholic education, I'll have leadership skills, recognize God's will in my life, and know how to treat people right. These skills are what sets students who go through Catholic education apart, and that is truly a gift of a lifetime.

Enid Ivanov said, "When life gives you a gift, receive it with all of your heart." Catholic education is a true gift that will help you become your best self. It is a gift that will help everyone go and make a difference in the world.

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Gloucester Catholic



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Learning to see through a filter of faith

By Claire Velte
Paul VI High School, Haddonfield

In the past three years as a student at Paul VI High School, I have become acutely aware of the impact of my Catholic education. I consider the opportunity to attend PVI a gift because it blends all aspects of my life, including academics, social interaction, service in my community, and my relationship with my faith. My relationship with my faith has been especially impacted as a result of my Catholic education, and I could not be more impressed with the effect the Paul VI family has had upon it.

I came from a small, public middle school with an intense focus on academics and barely any emphasis on personal growth, so Paul VI was a new and rewarding adjustment. Not only were my first impressions of my freshman year teachers positive, but I felt my four years at the school would be enriching in a much deeper sense. And though this was immediately apparent to me in ninth grade, it took until my junior year for my Catholic education to impact my faith in a very real way.

When I was assigned Mr. Rendfrey as a teacher for religion this year, I was assigned a coach in my faith, and

My Catholic education creates an opportunity for introspection that I may have missed out on had I not chosen to attend Paul VI.

one whose attention to detail and investment in his students has made all the difference in how I perceive the world. I didn't necessarily find a connection in my life regarding the principles of my Catholic faith and the impact that it has on collective society through service and reverence. Mr. Rendfrey opened my eyes to all of this.

I can safely say Mr. Rendfrey's teachings have changed my life's view. I appreciate the way he makes religion accessible to everyone, and his outlook transcends literal teachings to encompass unique interpretations of God's influence.

Coming to his class as a student without a concrete understanding of

her relationship with God, he has helped me to understand the complexities of my faith, as well as how to remedy any doubts I may have within it. His teaching contains a strong emphasis on understanding and utilizing sacramental awareness, a way of thinking in which one comes to recognize the extraordinary in the ordinary. This way of thinking allowed me to examine the world around me through the filter of my faith and to recognize the kindness and love within it. My Catholic education creates an opportunity for introspection that I may have missed out on had I not chosen to attend Paul VI.

The energy expended by the Catholic school teachers I have



CLAIRE VELTE

encountered throughout my education amazes me; their endless support and investment in their students' wellbeing and success is a gift to all those under their guidance. I consider my Catholic education to be the gift of a lifetime because it has guided me toward a more intense examination of my faith and my relationship with the world around me. I'm only a junior so I am excited to see how much more I can grow at Paul VI in the coming year before I can take the lessons I've learned here out into the world.

We learn our faith by living it in Catholic school

By Aidan Higgins
Saint John Paul II, Stratford

I am dust, and unto dust I shall return. In the meantime, I am growing, learning and appreciating the ride I get to take along the way. Like every other kid, I have to go to school every day, but unlike every kid, I love it. I have been at Saint John Paul II since pre-school. It is my extended family, and I can attribute who I am today, the way that I think, feel, believe and live, to that school family as well as the parents and immediate family I have been blessed with.

We all wear the same uniform but have different colored hair, eyes and skin and different personalities. We come from different backgrounds but blend together to share and learn from each other as well as from our teachers. They encourage us every day to learn and improve ourselves by being proud of successes and challenged by mistakes. Every year I have been there a teacher has changed how I look at different situations for the better. I remember being hugged and singing about Jesus loving me as vividly as I remember learning to read. We learn our faith by living it. Older students pair with younger ones to attend week-



AIDAN HIGGINS

ly Mass and we pray and sing together. I love learning about our religion because I can apply every lesson to my own life and share it with others. It feels great to join my classmates making sandwiches for the poor, collecting donations for families in need, dressing down and contributing to hurricane victim efforts, etc.

Our studies are not always easy. We work hard with teachers always ready to help when necessary. I remember being confused by some grammar intricacies, so I went to my ELA teacher, Mr. Frank, multiple times

I can say that who I have grown to be is in a large part of who I have grown up with both at home and at school.

when he could fit me in, and he worked patiently with me until it made sense. On those days I learned not only how to locate a subject complement, but also to extend a helping hand to others in need. I try to help anyone who asks and give them the same patience and support I received when I was being helped.

Challenging projects or reports encourage independent thinking to gain insight and understand a wide variety of subjects. The religious part of the education tests how much you already know about your faith and teaches you material that you do not. The teachers provide assistance but they also challenge you to figure out things on your own. If you don't understand something, you can simply

raise your hand and ask for more help.

I play a lot of sports outside of school and share everyday experiences with kids from other schools. None describe their feeling about school the way I do. The best part about my school experience is how I feel like I am home every time I enter school. The entire school is a large family that supports one another constantly. I think everyone should have the chance to feel and share that warmth and compassion. I cannot express how thankful I am to receive a Catholic education. I can say that who I have grown to be is in a large part of who I have grown up with both at home and at school. I can honestly say that although I have a long way to go, today I am more than happy with who I am.



Photo by James A. McBride

STRONG EDUCATION — Students from Camden Catholic High School, Cherry Hill, sing at the kick off for Catholic Strong on Jan. 16 at Our Lady of Hope Parish, Blackwood.

Bullying, discrimination, hatred have no place here

By Jared Alkea
Holy Name School, Camden

Last Christmas I received a lot of gifts from my family and friends. My parents have also chosen to give me another gift, a Catholic school education. For six years I attended public school, but then my parents decided to send me to Holy Name. I can truly say my Catholic school education is the gift of a lifetime.

The main reason I think Catholic school education is a great gift is because of the opportunity. Our opportunities at Catholic school are very diverse. For example, my school has a program with Rutgers University called Ignite. It provides a taste of a college experience by having classes on campus. The program also has lessons on cooking, financial management, gardening, dancing and many other fun activities. Our school also takes us to Rutgers to see art exhibits and to see shows.

Along with this program, eighth grade students at Holy Name also have the opportunity to get an internship at Adventure Aquarium. At the end of the

We can always go to the church when we need to. That is where I thank God for the blessing of Catholic education.

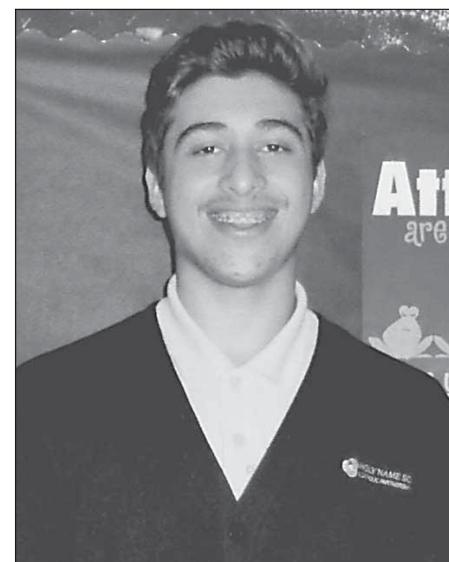
year we participate in a very cool speech contest.

My Catholic school provides many other extracurricular activities, such as sports, choir, robotics and aviation club. The Catholic Partnership sponsors the teams and activities. We have a wide variety of sports, and we play other local Catholic schools. I am grateful to be able to participate in all the activities the Catholic Partnership supplies.

Catholic school gives me great gifts now, but it also prepares me for the future. Catholic middle schools try very hard to prepare their students for high school, and for this reason high schools look for Catholic school graduates. Many local high schools compete for the best students from Catholic schools because they know

we are taught well. We have organized trips to high schools, and we get to meet students when they do service at our school. Alumni from Catholic schools tend to go back and help at the schools that got them to where they are now.

Catholic school alumni come back because of the strong bonds that are created at Catholic schools. The school I attend is like a second family to me. We are tight knit so there is no bullying, discrimination or hatred. Our school is small but it creates love between all the students and teachers. Holy Name is still home for alumni, too. My mom was in the first eighth grade class to graduate from Holy Name. I can already see myself coming back years later and coaching the basketball team I once played for.



JARED ALKEA

Catholic school is a great blessing but its biggest difference from public school is spirituality. In public school religion is not a subject up for discussion, but in Catholic school we have religion class. We also have Mass every month, and we can always go to the church when we need to. That is where I thank God for the blessing of Catholic education because it is the gift of a lifetime.



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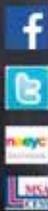
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Curriculum, plus life, morality and Christianity

By Leah Gallagher
Saint Joseph High School,
Hammonton

Many people have wondered what the true value of Catholic school is. I have gone to Catholic school my whole life. I grew up within walking distance of my local public high school. So when it came to high school, one might wonder why we chose to continue a distant Catholic high school over the local public school. To me, it was never a question.

People very close to me attended public school. They loved it very much and got excellent educations. They were close to their classmates and their teachers. For happiness, morality and success in life, never for a moment did I think it is a matter of the school a student attends. It is simply that Catholic school is what I have always known and enjoyed.

Throughout my Catholic school career, I have met many people that have changed my life for the better. Some of my kindergarten classmates are still my close friends to this day. When you are with the same group of people every day for years — those who have the same faith and

I learn from being challenged rather than having answers handed to me.

moral values as you — you learn so much about each other and about yourself.

There is a mutual respect between the teachers and the students. I have always strived to get along with my teachers. My teachers have always made my overall Catholic school experience so much better. They are excellent at teaching and care deeply about it and their students and their faith. They have taught me not only what is in the curriculum, but about life, morality and Christianity.

My schools have all been very friendly and welcoming environments. The students generally get along remarkably well. I believe that the Catholic teachings are a big part of that. Very few times have I witnessed any forms of bullying or fighting.

Many of my teachers in elementary school assigned the class group projects. They set us up to teach ourselves

how to work together. They taught us the morals, but we taught ourselves the skill of working together as a community.

Catholic school has never been easy, but the challenge is what is important. I learn from being challenged rather than having answers handed to me. Teachers make me think and genuinely care about the topic at hand, whether it be math, science or religion. We often have class discussions and debates to hear different perspectives in subjects such as history and literature.

Every year since my confirmation in eighth grade, I have been assigned to complete a certain number of hours of community service. From this I learned the importance of responsibility and teamwork. It also has shown me what it is like to give back. I have learned to appreciate the life that I have and to not take my health and happiness for granted. It is a strong



LEAH GALLAGHER

Christian value I will always carry with me.

I will appreciate my time in Catholic school for my entire life. I was given the tools to succeed both professionally and spiritually. These are things that will help not only me but those to whom I pass them along. I thank my parents, teachers, faculty and friends — but, most of all, Our Lord — for giving me this life-enriching experience.

Learning to use the gifts of God in the world

By Timothy Kubiak
Saint Mary School, East Vineland

I started at Saint Mary School in East Vineland, in pre-K 3 at age 3. I still attend Saint Mary School in eighth grade. For about 86 percent of my life, I have attended a Catholic school.

There are many different types of gifts, but I think that my gift of a Catholic education is unique. Most gifts are physical things that can be enjoyed or used in everyday life, and my Catholic education can do the same. Unlike most regular gifts, however, my Catholic education can never be taken away from me, and will last a lifetime. I will attend a Catholic high school as well, which definitely shows commitment to the ideals learned and practiced in the first major stage of my life.

At my school, service is expected in everyday life. We have had multiple school wide service projects. In one instance, my class collected and folded plastic bags in preparation for weaving them into mattresses for the homeless. As an officer of the Saint Mary School chapter of the National Junior Honor Society (NJHS), I schedule and attend many events at the nearby nursing home, Bishop McCarthy. All NJHS

members play bingo with the residents of Bishop McCarthy nursing home once a month on Saturdays. This was a unique experience, and it made me feel full and satisfied. I made people who may not have had much light in their life happy. It also gave me true joy by doing the same for others.

The other NJHS officers and I handed out Christmas cards created by each and every Saint Mary student during the Christmas school wide service project at Bishop McCarthy to brighten the residents' Christmas.

All NJHS members also participate in homework club, a weekly program to tutor pupils in younger grades with their homework and studies every week.

Every student in seventh and eighth grade has a buddy in either kindergarten or first grade whom we mentor. The buddies meet one or two times a month. Together, we complete holiday crafts and read stories. Last year, when



TIMOTHY KUBIAK

My Catholic education can never be taken away from me.

I was in seventh grade, the seventh and eighth graders took a trip to a Catholic school in Atlantic City for a day. There, we paired up with a child in the elementary grades for a day. We read books together, completed school work with each other, and even ate lunch and had recess together. This was one of my favorite experiences at St. Mary School. I have tutored three of my classmates in math, social studies, and science during study hall and after school. I was given the gift of intelligence by God, and I want to share that with my schoolmates.

My Catholic school is a great environment for the success of children. Our teachers are so committed to their ministry, not just jobs.

In literature class, the eighth grade read an excerpt from "The Diary of Anne Frank." Her family and she had to stay silent and perfectly still for days at a time. One day, when we came into Mr. Harris's classroom, we were told to sit at our desks silently and very still for 20 minutes. This was

not an easy task. I enjoyed this experience because I truly understood what we were learning, and it stimulated my brain to realize what it was like for Anne Frank and the others in that attic.

In third grade, our class had Titanic Day, in which we dressed up like notable passengers on that iconic ship and spent a day like them. Mrs. Myerson truly brought history to life on Titanic Day, and it was not only informative, but it was *fun*. We have religion class every day, and we attend Mass three times a month, which centers us.

I am immensely thankful for my Catholic education, and I will remember how special it was. I was given a deluge of opportunities in Catholic school to succeed, and I will never forget them. I know my teachers on a cordial level, as well as the rest of the staff. My Catholic education enriched my life, and I was taught how to use the gifts of God in the world. Although I will be leaving Saint Mary School next year, I will surely give back, for I have received the gift of a lifetime.

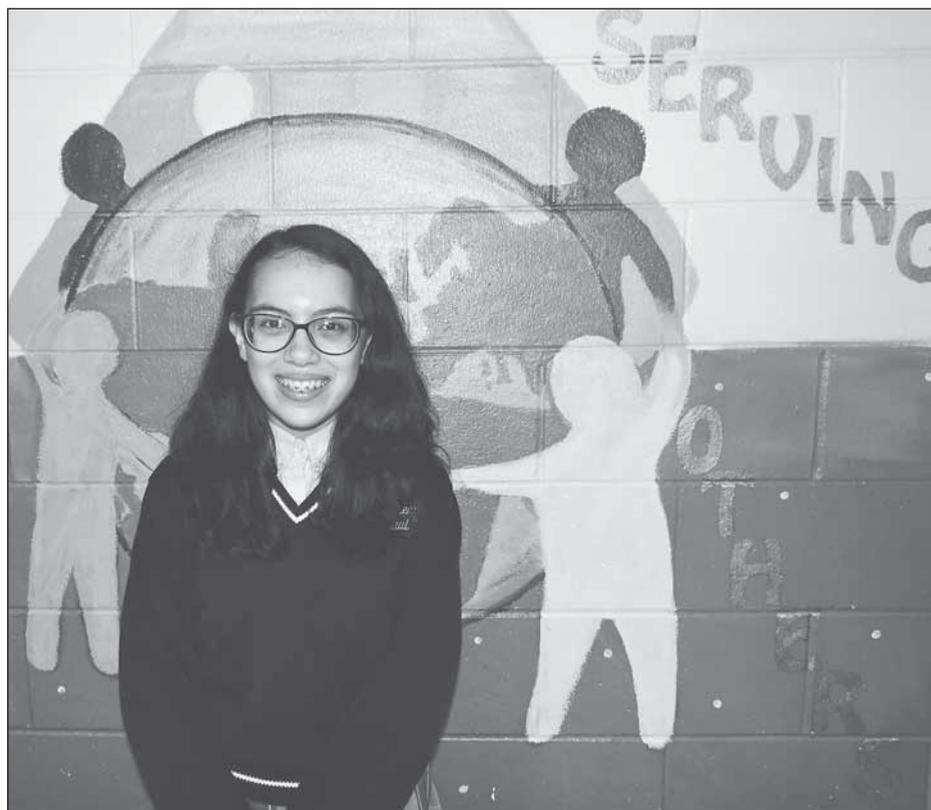
A friendly environment helps overcome shyness

By Alexandria Ciurlino
Saint Vincent de Paul Regional
School, Mays Landing

I'm 14 years old, and I've attended Saint Vincent de Paul Regional School my whole life. When I was little, I didn't really know the difference between my school and public schools. I just knew that in my school, we said prayers together daily, celebrated Mass monthly, and were taught to treat people with kindness all the time. I didn't know prayers weren't usually said in public schools. I also had no idea how many benefits my school has, such as excellent academics, various clubs and a friendly environment.

Here are some of the main reasons why my Catholic school education is the gift of a lifetime for me.

First and foremost, my Catholic school emphasizes the importance of my faith in my life. I've learned how important it is to act out my faith by praying, attending Mass as a school, and doing volunteer projects, which help us form bonds with each other and with the community. Some of the times I volunteered were when my class hosted a Thanksgiving dinner for senior citizens last year, when I made sandwiches with Ms. Girard and the PB&J club for a rescue mission, and when I sang Christmas carols at nursing homes in December with the select choir and our director, Ms. Teresa.



ALEXANDRIA CIURLINO

Another time I volunteered was when my class and I painted the fence of the school's next door neighbors, the Fosters, who were a sweet, older couple. It felt good to do something nice for them before Mrs. Foster unexpectedly passed away recently.

In my little Catholic school, everybody knows everybody. We're all like family because of how close we are

and how we can all depend on one another for support. We have a system called prayer partners, in which each Pre-K 4 and kindergarten student is assigned a seventh or eighth grader who will become their prayer partner for the year, look out for them, and do fun activities with them.

In my school, students feel loved and accepted for who they are and

aren't pressured to change who they are to fit in. Being in a primarily bully-free environment prevents a lot of stress and anxiety and helps students to learn in a more relaxed and motivated way, allowing us to do our best at all times.

My school has high academic standards. I think the things I've learned over the years in this school have really helped prepare me for high school and the real world. We have challenging assignments and projects, as well as competitions such as spelling and geography bees and science fairs. We also have various outlets for sports and the arts. I have won the spelling bee several times, and I participate in the drama club, select choir and student council, which allow me to use my talents to cooperate with fellow students to help others.

Catholic school has really been a gift for me thus far. When I was little, I was very shy and had a hard time making friends. Going to a Catholic school at such a young age allowed me to meet people in a smaller, friendlier environment. I met amazing kids who are still my best friends to this day. The biggest gift of Catholic education for me is probably the lasting bonds that you make with people, whether they are fellow students, teachers, or administrators. The people I have met over the years at this school will be with me like handprints on my heart for the rest of my life.

A return to Catholic school, a return to faith

By Camryn Lanza
Saint Joseph Regional Elementary
School, Hammonton

I have the gift of a lifetime because I go to a Catholic school. Being in a Catholic school is most certainly a gift, but it is a gift I learned to appreciate. I experienced something that made me appreciate this, and I am eager to share it with you.

It was the summer of third grade year entering fourth, my mom came home at the end of the day, as usual, and gave me the option to be moved to a public school. She had always hesitated about putting me in a public school because up to this time, I had spent my whole life in Catholic school.

Looking back to fourth and fifth grade, I now notice how I strayed from God. I didn't know of a single person that had the same beliefs as I did, and when I stopped hearing about him I forgot. I was not learning about my faith, or how to make it stronger. I stopped doing the simplest things to

I firmly believe that my faith would never be as strong as it is in this moment of my life if my parents did not send me to a Catholic school.

keep my bond with God strong, like saying prayers before meals, or before going to bed. After a while not doing these things just became normal for me.

I admit that I had forgotten about my faith. I felt like I wouldn't fit in because I thought I was different for having beliefs in something so many other people did not. It changed me, I became bitter, and when things weren't going too good I didn't pray so God

could not hear me reaching out to him for mercy.

I felt that God had forgotten about me, but really it was me that forgot about him. I thought that everything would just come to me, like I didn't need to work for it, but it was stupid of me to think that.

I don't think he punished me for becoming distant, but I believe that when I disconnected from him that my life was turned upside down. Things

took an unexpected turn. When I look back now, I think if I was closer to God, it would have helped me deal with certain situations better.

When my family and I decided it was time to move me back to Saint Joseph Regional Elementary School, the Catholic school I had previously attended, the faith that I lost instantly became restored, I was surrounded by God and felt that he had forgiven me. I was dedicated to rebuild the strong connection I had had before.

This experience taught me a lesson — it taught me that my Catholic education is the gift of a lifetime because without it I would be lost in a world of false gods, and uncertainty. Being in a Catholic school, leaving and then re-entering, made me realize how diverse everyone's perspective on religion really is, and no matter what to never walk away from what you believe in. I need God in my life more than ever now, and I firmly believe that my faith would never be as strong as it is in this moment of my life if my parents did not send me to a Catholic school.



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Photo by Alan M. Dumoff

DAY OF SERVICE — Good Shepherd School, Collingswood, dedicated Jan. 12 as a day of service. Left, third grade students work on candy sachets and Valentine's Day cards that will be delivered to Collingswood Manor, an assisted living facility, by the eighth grade during their February visit.

Gratitude for parents' sacrifice and priest's inspiration

By Anthony Cavone
Good Shepherd School, Collingswood

As an eighth grade student at Good Shepherd School, something extraordinary happened this year that has truly affected my faith in God and His Son, Jesus Christ. It was the addition of a special class taught by Msgr. Leonard Scott. Who is Msgr. Scott? Msgr. Scott is a retired priest that volunteers his time to teach me and my fellow eighth grade students at Good Shepherd School. Each Tuesday, he comes to our school and teaches us about our faith, starting with the Gospel from the previous Sunday Mass. His classes have inspired me in many ways.

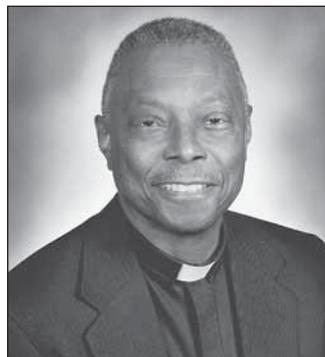
Msgr. Scott's classes have made me more faithful about going to church. I make sure I go every Sunday and on holy days of obligation. Msgr. Scott's classes have also influenced me to pay attention to the readings and the homily during Mass. I am not only inspired to be prepared to participate in his classes, but I also read the Gospel a number of times after Mass, trying to fully understand Jesus' message.

Sometimes I find the Gospel difficult to understand, but then Msgr. Scott breaks it down and explains it in a way that allows me to gain understanding. Not only does he teach us about the Gospel, Msgr. Scott teaches us about the Mass, holy days, feast

days and the Bible. When I was younger, I didn't pay much attention during Mass, but now that I am older and learning more about what is happening during Mass — thanks to Msgr. Scott — I not only pay attention during Mass, but have a greater appreciation of why the celebration of Mass is so important.

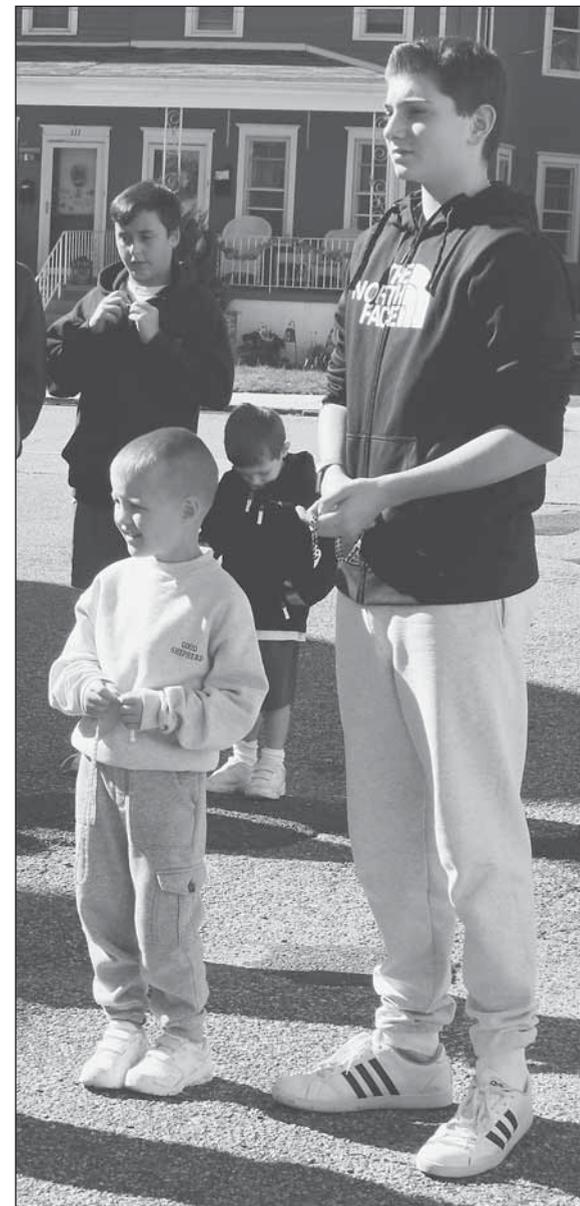
One of Msgr. Scott's most memorable classes was when he told us the story of how he found his vocation to be a priest. I was amazed that he heard his calling and answered it while he was in eighth grade. It made me think about what direction I am going to take with my life. I don't yet know what career or vocation I will choose, but one thing I do know is that I am going to stay committed to my Catholic faith; something I will work to strengthen each day. I also plan to learn more about my faith by continuing my Catholic school education throughout high school and college.

Faith is the gift of a lifetime. From my Catholic school education, I have had the benefit of learning about God and how to practice my faith. The classes with Msgr. Scott tied all the years of religion classes together with the celebration of Mass and put everything into perspective. I consider his classes a true gift along with my entire Catholic school education. I realize this is something that none of my friends in public school will ever experience



Above, Msgr. Leonard G. Scott teaches religion to the eighth grade at Good Shepherd School, Collingswood, one day a week. Right, Anthony Cavone with his kindergarten buddy during the school's Living Rosary in October 2017.

in their classrooms. This special gift of knowledge about my faith is something that I will have for the rest of my life. Although it is a sacrifice for my parents, I am confident that I would not have had such a unique opportunity to learn about God and my faith in Him were it not for a Catholic school education. I would say that my Catholic school education is truly a gift of a lifetime.





SERVICE WITH A SMILE — Grace Smithwick, a sophomore at Bishop Eustace Preparatory School, Pennsauken, makes sandwiches at Saint John of God Community Services, Westville, on Jan. 15, for its second annual Martin Luther King Day of Service.

Finding faith and higher academic expectations

By Angelica Rivera
Saint Cecilia School, Pennsauken

A couple of years ago, I was a young girl in a non-Catholic school. It was small but it felt like a home. I was achieving good grades and was in an environment I felt I was thriving in. I really thought, "Nothing can get better than this." I ended up graduating sixth grade with only five other students and we all moved on to Saint Cecilia's, a Catholic K-8 elementary school.

I wasn't quite sure what to expect from my new school. One thing I really didn't expect was that I was behind academically compared to these students. Some of the concepts they mentioned having previously learned I hadn't even heard of. Thankfully, I was able to catch up to my new classmates quickly and continued to receive good grades.

Suddenly it seemed to make so much sense why everything seemed way too easy for me before. This is the level I should've been learning and would've been learning had I gone to the school sooner.

I am now in my eighth grade year at Saint Cecilia's. I was welcomed in this school community, and I have grown academically and spiritually. My next chapter in life will be high school. When accepting students, most high schools have holistic admissions. They look for certain things in prospective students, like grades, test scores, involvement and service. Many of my classmates were

involved in extracurriculars but I was not. Thankfully, I was cast in our school's Christmas play. My old school didn't have any sort of extracurricular activities. There weren't any sports teams or clubs and most of us did not realize the kind of negative impact this could have in the future of our academic careers. Catholic school has so many opportunities I had never even dreamed of.

Equally important to these opportunities is the faith component of a Catholic school. I was pleasantly surprised by how deeply rooted in the faith the school is. Saint Cecilia's is so accepting and willing to teach all students regardless of religious affiliation. I am so thankful that even with my lack of knowledge on the faith, I have been taught so I could understand and follow along well.

In short, now about halfway through my eighth grade year, I know that I am ready for whatever challenges may face me on my journey to high school. Attending a Catholic school has opened so many doors for me that I never even knew existed. I am so grateful that I came to Saint Cecilia's because if I hadn't I really don't know where I would be right now. I feel truly blessed to have received a Catholic education and look forward to continue it at a Catholic high school. Catholic schools provide their students with an exemplary education, amazing opportunities, and a great focus on religious and moral values. Honestly, receiving a Catholic school education truly is the gift of a lifetime.

A passion to do good, to succeed, to excel

By Michael Alvarez
Saint Teresa Regional School,
Runnemede

My Catholic school education is a gift of a lifetime because it helps me be the best possible person I can be. Having an Catholic education helps me be the best person I can possibly be spiritually, academically and athletically. The teachers and staff care for each and every student no matter the class size. Their main priority is to help the students to not only learn but to excel.

Having a Catholic education means the world to me. Having a Catholic education helped me in the real world. It taught me to be kind and courteous to others. I was brought into a loving and compassionate environment which

I was brought into a loving and
compassionate environment
which we are taught to
spread to others.

we are taught to spread to others. Having a Catholic education means being part of a family. Sure, we excel in academics and sports but there is one thing no other school has, our passion. Our passion to do good, our passion to succeed, our passion to excel. That's why our school is different. Catholic education taught me that. It taught me we should never be content

with just ourselves, but we should always strive to be better and better. Nobody's perfect. There is always room for improvement.

At Saint Teresa the class size is small. You might think of that as a bad thing but it isn't. Having a small class helps us work together and develop team building and communication skills. I have been working together

with the same people since kindergarten. We've become somewhat of a family. Even as more people joined our family we were always kind, courteous and welcoming toward them. Our family has grown.

Catholic school education is truly a gift. It helps us in the present and on the gateway to our future. I truly believe it is the key to success. It is our first step toward the rest of our lives. Without a Catholic school education, without the knowledge of Jesus, without good foundations of academics, without teamwork, without family, then I believe you will not succeed. All human beings require a knowledge of the goodness of God. We must learn to work together. That is what I truly believe is the key to success.



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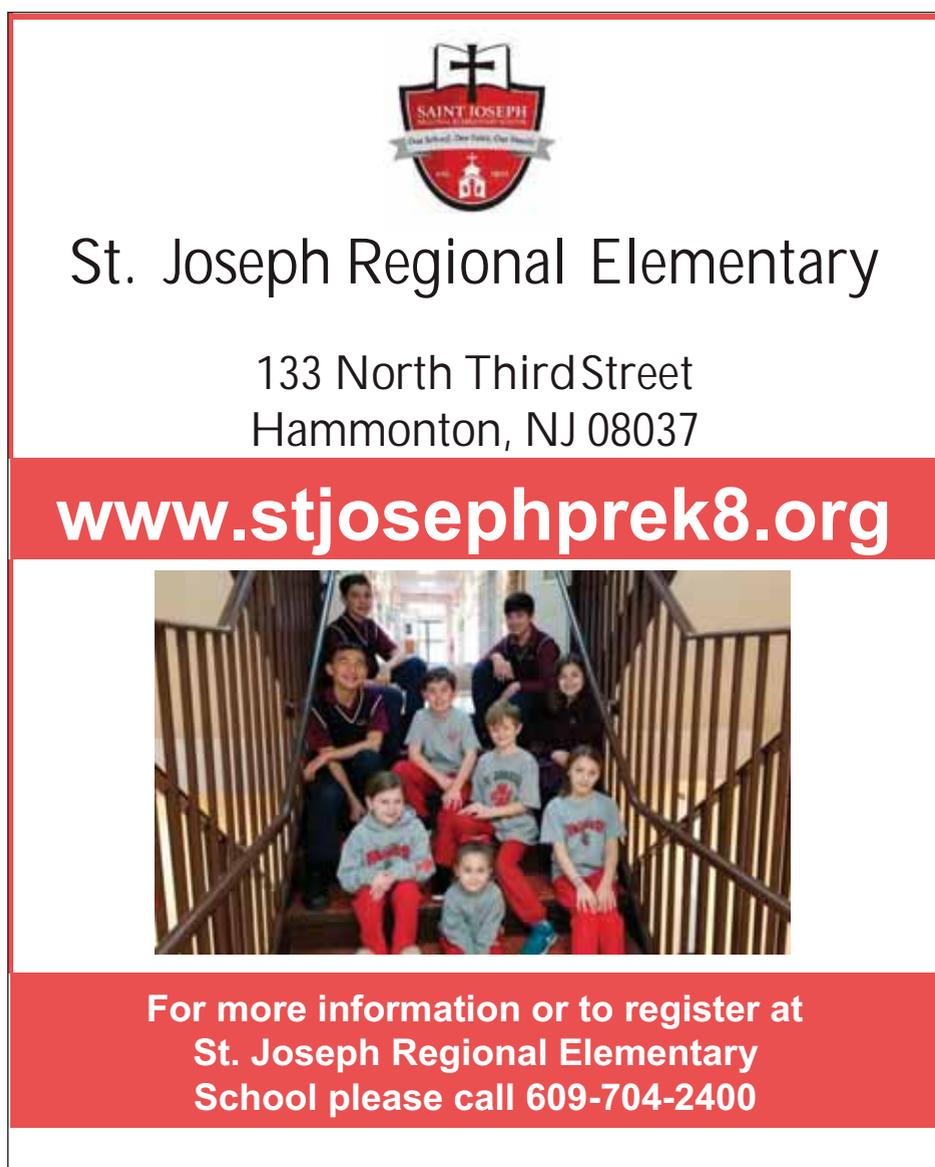
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Catholic school shapes the whole person

By Gabriella Giegerich
Camden Catholic High School,
Cherry Hill

Growing up the oldest in a large Catholic family, the thought of my Catholic school education as a gift had never crossed my mind. Catholic school was all I had ever known. At 3 years old, I was enrolled in Saint Mary of Lakes School in Medford, New Jersey, where I spent 11 years as a student. When I graduated from eighth grade I came to Camden

Catholic. To me, Catholic school was a lifestyle.

Now, as I look back on my 14 years and counting in Catholic school, I realize how much it has shaped and molded me into the faith-filled person that I am today.

My real contemplation of what Catholic school has done for me didn't really come into full view until very recently. My younger brother Rocco is currently an eighth grader at Saint Mary of the Lakes. Two months ago he was being interviewed for a school

event. One of the questions was, "What does being a Saint Mary's student mean to you?" Without hesitation he responded, "This means being a well-rounded, intelligent, young man who has strong morals he keeps at heart." I was astonished the first time I heard this. He had hit the nail on the head. The statement was so profound and true. In that short sentence he perfectly summed it up. A Catholic education provides a strong foundation for each child to

grow and develop physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually with God as its core. It shapes the whole person.

One of the many reasons Catholic education is such a gift is the people who work there. The teachers are not just there to teach, but to form a relationship and personal bond with each student. They are teachers, mentors, friends, and even a shoulder to cry on. In my life this was especially true during my time in grade school when we lost two students to rare forms of cancer. As young kids we were scared and confused. We couldn't understand why this would happen to two bright, innocent girls. The entire faculty and staff,

from the principal to the janitors, walked through each step of this difficult time, all the while reminding us that God was with us.

At Camden Catholic the teachers take a vested interest in preparing us for college and our future.

From the time I was born, my parents have instilled the Catholic values in me and my five younger siblings. As I have gotten older, I have come to see and better understand what a huge sacrifice they make so that my

siblings and I can have this gift. They recognize that our Catholic education gives us the skills not only to succeed in school, but in life.

Those who have fostered my Catholic education have instilled in me a strong faith, compassion for others, dedication, humility, confidence, a strong work ethic and kindness. These are values that I strive to live each day. This gift is one that challenges us, tests us, inspires us, molds us, and prepares us to serve others. It encourages us to be the change we would like to see in the world. I feel a Catholic education is without a doubt among the greatest gifts a child can receive.



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