

# Bishop Lori, at scholarship dinner, praises expansion of St. Catherine Academy

By Dan Quinlan, Contributing Writer 06/11/2009

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Bishop Lori asked Ashley Escobar, aged 21, to approach the speaker's pulpit and be recognized for her achievements. Displaying a bright smile, she stepped down from the podium amidst cheers and applause. As she weaved through the tables on her way back to her seat, she offered high fives to her mother, as well as donors to the Saint Catherine Academy. Later this month, Ashley will become the second graduate of the special needs school, which this past Sunday held its annual Scholarship Dinner.

On that warm summer evening 160 guests, including numerous Knights of Columbus, priests from the Bridgeport Diocese, parents of Saint Catherine students, various independent donors, and the guest of honor Bishop William E. Lori, met at Fairfield University's Barone Center to raise scholarship money for the school.

The academy was established in 1999 with an enrollment of just four students. In the intervening decade, the school has expanded to 20 students aged 5-21, and has moved from the Diocese of Bridgeport to a 6,000 sq. ft. facility on the grounds of the Holy Cross Parish in Fairfield. Officially, the school is licensed to educate children with intellectual disabilities, but students often have coincident physical disabilities. As a result, the teachers of Saint Catherine work with disorders ranging from Down's Syndrome to cerebral palsy. Academic subjects are supplemented by physical education, as well as vocational and life skills courses. The curriculum can also be adjusted for the specific needs of each student.

In Ashley's case, Helen Burland, President of Saint Catherine Academy, remarked, "Ashley has benefited fully from the life skills and vocational programs." During her last year she worked in the Bridgeport storeroom of Bigelow Tea, which prepared her for her post graduation job with the Kennedy Center's Stamps & Stuff Store in Stratford.

In addition to helping students to find employment, Saint Catherine's unique apartment styled classroom helps pupils to learn skills for an independent life. Due to the myriad needs of students and the necessity for teachers to work on individualized lessons, tuition for Saint Catherine is \$40,000 per year.

About one quarter of the student body receives full sponsorship from their home school district, and the majority of the remaining three quarters receive some level of scholarship money. The funds for financial aid are raised in part by the Scholarship Dinner, which during the past five years has generated between \$80,000 and \$120,000 worth of donations per annum.

At this year's event, three teachers who have been with the school since the beginning: Gina Barber who teaches art, Sister Nancy O'Neill, CND who teaches music, and Sonia Vielot who is a classroom aide, received certificates of gratitude. Bill Lytton produced a short film about the academy, which had its inaugural screening. There was also a raffle and an auction, which offered diverse items ranging from quilts to fishing trips in Montana.

The Knights of Columbus, whose delegation was led by Deputy Supreme Knight Dennis A. Savoie, contributed \$25,000 towards the cost of the event; and the Connecticut Knights, who are represented on the school's advisory board by Tom Vita, made an additional gift of \$6,600. The McClinch family bought a new van for the school's transportation needs. Britten and Denis Nayden offered a \$50,000 donation subject to matching, a condition that was met in less than twenty minutes with grants ranging from \$10,000 to \$1,000. President Helen Burland began the evening with the goal of raising \$100,000, and preliminary estimates suggest that nearly twice that amount will be added to the Academy scholarship fund. Burland stated, "The students and staff feel very fortunate to have the broad support we received at Sunday night's event, which included a full range of people from all over Connecticut." She added that the generosity of the guests was exceptionally impressive given the tired state of the U.S. economy.

Bishop Lori, the evening's honoree, began his remarks by stating, "What a work of God, what a wonderful ministry, what an example of putting our faith in action that Saint Catherine's is." The school has particular significance for the Bishop since his brother was a special needs student. Lori recalled that, "there was little or nothing to help my parents," and so they founded a school that could support children such as their son. Lori noted that upon becoming Bishop of Bridgeport in 2001 he was eager to expand the Saint Catherine Academy, the drive to do so was "already in my DNA." He added, "I have been to a lot of graduations this season, but the biggest and best is yet to come and that will be next week when Ashley graduates."

With the combination of the Bishop's backing and a successful Scholarship Dinner, Saint Catherine Academy can look ahead to expanding its curriculum for special needs students. Beginning this fall the Academy will begin an exchange program with the Fairfield University Graduate School of Education and Allied Professions. Masters students in Dr. Daniel Geller's "Introduction to Individuals with Intellectual Disabilities" course will conduct their observation hours at Saint Catherine. The following spring some Saint Catherine students will journey to Fairfield University for vocational and social experience. Dr. Geller stated in a telephone interview, "As professionals we like the idea of providing students, especially from Saint Catherine, opportunities to have an inclusive experience on campus." Geller was formerly a consultant at the Kennedy Center in Trumbull and has expressed great enthusiasm for the exchange program, which "adds a new dimension" to his course as special needs students will be visiting the university.

For more information about the Saint Catherine Academy, including enrollment and donations, please visit [www.stcatherineacademy.org](http://www.stcatherineacademy.org) or contact President Helen Burlan at [helen.burlan@diobptedu.org](mailto:helen.burlan@diobptedu.org).