

Paths of Joy

Students walk the talk of faith during Catholic Education Week



Kyla Dumlao sits in the chapel at St. Joseph's Catholic High School. The Grade 12 student says it's a place where she can go to sit and quietly reflect.

(Windsor, Ontario, Monday May 4, 2015) – There was a time when Kyla Dumlao was a little nervous discussing her faith around her friends and classmates. Those days are long gone.

Despite being raised in a Catholic family and always having firm beliefs, the Grade 12 student still felt uneasy about openly expressing those beliefs around others. It wasn't until Grade 10, after having attending several faith-based leadership conferences that she really found the courage to throw caution to the wind.

"I really became more confident about my faith and became more passionate about living it," said Dumlao, who has served on the St. Joseph's High School student administrative council for the last two years and is currently one of two student trustees appointed to the Windsor-Essex Catholic District School Board.

Yesterday marked the beginning of Catholic Education Week across Ontario. This year's theme is "Exploring Paths of Joy," and throughout the week schools will be participating in daily activities that celebrate what distinguishes them as a faith-based education system.

For students like D.J. Stillman, who's in Grade 12 at Catholic Central High School, every day provides an opportunity to celebrate his faith. Despite the fact that he struggled with doubt and periodic bouts of depression when he was younger, Stillman says he now feels "fully invested" in his faith.

"I'm in a happier, more positive place now," says Stillman, who plans to go to the University of Windsor next year for a double major in English and psychology. "I don't look at things so negatively any more, and as a result, my grades are substantially higher."

Dumlao and Stillman both agreed that being in an academic milieu that both encourages and celebrates spiritual development helped them along the way. Stillman specifically cited the influence of Luigi DiFazio, his Grade 11 world religions teacher.

"His lessons really spoke to me," he said. "He gave every religion its' due, and never showed any clear bias to one over another, and we were able to see the relation between all of them. That really made me stronger in my own faith because I was able to objectively evaluate all of the others."

For Dumlao, attending several conferences would eventually lead to an epiphanic moment of self discovery. While still a Grade 8 student at St. John Vianney Catholic Elementary School, she attended the Christ in Others Retreat in London, where she got to talk with older students about their faith.

Grade 10, however, would prove to be a watershed year. She went to a conference at the Franciscan University of Steubenville in Ohio, the Catholic Christian Leadership Camp in London, as well as the Hugh O'Brian Youth leadership conference in Guelph. The result of all that personal development was a major transformation.

"I saw that there were a lot of people just like me," she said. "I really came out of my shell. I talked to different leaders and I was really inspired by how they changed their schools and how easy it can be to become a leader. It solidified my courage to live my faith. My faith originated from my parents, but I eventually claimed my faith as my own. And that really pushed me forward to take the next step. I felt like I had a gift to share. I felt like I can do anything."

Besides taking on a leadership role at her school, Dumlao resolved to put her faith into action by starting up a Best Buddies program. Inspired by a younger sister with autism, she helped

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Exploring Paths of JOY

launch a new initiative that pairs up students with special needs with other students throughout the school. They hold parties for special occasions like Christmas, Easter, and Valentine's Day, but encourage the buddies to check in with their friends at least once a week. So far, there are about 40 students in the program.

"They're a part of our school and they deserve friendship just like anyone else," she said. "And they have a lot to offer. Christ would teach us to love everyone and to be a friend to those who are lonely. I felt that God was calling me to do this."



Like Stillman, Dumlao says her faith in God has helped her scholastically. Her average is currently hovering somewhere between 87 and 92 per cent, and she plans to go to the University of Windsor next year where she'll do a major in biology and a minor in psychology, with the goal of ultimately doing something related to neuroscience.

"I always pray before my tests," she said. "It gives me a sense of peace and hope that God will help me find the wisdom I need."

As for the future, she hopes to one day work with those with special needs, helping them better integrate into the mainstream workforce. For now though, she's just grateful to have been brought up in a faith-based environment that developed her personal traits founded on some very fundamental Christian virtues.

"Always be kind and respectful," she responded when asked about those virtues. "Be a helping hand and never degrade others. By being kind, you're being a symbol of God's love, and everyone is deserving of God's love and kindness."

For a complete list of Catholic Education Week activities at WECD SB schools, visit:

<http://wecdsb.on.ca/school-catholiceducationweek.asp>