



## SAINT CATHERINE CENTER FOR *Special Needs*

### *The Joy of Reading: Library Volunteers Make Stories Come Alive*

"When we started the Library Program back in 2008, the idea was for the children to experience and enjoy books read out loud and learn to feel comfortable in a library," said volunteer Virginia Dwyer-Aoyama. "Going to the local library is an ordinary life experience; we wanted Saint Catherine students to have that."

Virginia had been approached by Jeanie Tisdale, who was then Area Chair of the Order of Malta, to see if she would consider developing a program for the library at the Academy, which had just received a grant from the Order for improvements. Virginia and Jeanie (pictured at right) met with Helen Burland, Executive Director, to discuss the possibilities, and the Library Program at Saint Catherine Center was born.

Led by a dedicated group of Malta volunteers, a weekly Library session is now part of the curriculum for all Academy classes. "The students learn how to listen and pay attention. They also learn about responsibility—how to choose and check out a book, take it home, maybe share it with their families and bring it back the following week," Virginia said.

"The program is entirely volunteer-run," said Helen. "It has been wonderful to see it evolve and become part of our curriculum. We so appreciate what all the volunteers do for us. It's a big commitment and we depend on them." In addition to Virginia and Jeanie, other regular volunteers include Carrie Sindelar, Christy Duggan, Judy Miller, and Ellen Arsenault. New to the program this year are Elena Schlegel, Chris Woods, and Julie Genovese.

The volunteers have learned how to be flexible and "go with the flow" according to the students' needs. "The students come back from their library session excited,"



said Sr. Cheryl Driscoll, one of the teachers. "The stories are fun and appropriate for them. They find words they can recognize and are using their skills."

While improving reading and listening skills is important, having fun is key. Volunteers use singing and movement to make the stories come alive. "Five golden rings!" Ronald sang out at a recent session. He knew most of the words to "The 12 Days of Christmas" and his excitement helped other students join in the song.

"We're always trying to gear our book choices toward something they love," Virginia said. The "Pete the Cat" series by James Dean, in which a cat learns to make the best of various difficult and humorous situations, is very popular. Another favorite pop-up book, "The Color Monster," by Anna Llenas, helps readers identify and cope with emotions. "Whatever we have, we make the most of it," Virginia noted. "Books bring comfort, new ideas, different ways of dealing with situations. There's a lot of joy and humor in reading, and the kids experience it."

Participants in the Adult Program also use the library, borrowing a book to read or listen to as part of their daily schedule. Approximately a third of the young adults have independent reading skills, and all enjoy story-telling time when staff read aloud to the whole group.

After 11 years of volunteering in the library at the Center, both Virginia and Jeanie continue to find the work rewarding. "I love being with the students, getting to know them, and sharing time with them," Virginia said.

Jeanie agreed. "For me, it is always perfect time... It comes, after all, from many years of rising up to meet the kids wherever they are. I always leave with so much more than I give."

*The Saint Catherine Center library is dedicated to Catherine McClinch, an Academy student who loved the Library program. When she passed away in 2016, her mother donated her books, which occupy a special section of the library.*





## *Giving Back: A Role for Everyone*

On a recent Monday afternoon at the Connecticut Food Bank in Bridgeport, seven participants from the Adult Program were hard at work assembling bags of snacks to be picked up later by a nearby food pantry for families in need. Francesca, Angel, Patrick R, Emily, Tierra, Patrick N, and Gus all enjoyed the job, which required physical coordination, following instructions, and working together as a team. Lively music from a staff member's phone helped make the tasks go smoothly.

The Connecticut Food Bank is the latest organization to partner with Saint Catherine Center to provide meaningful vocational opportunities. In addition to the Food Bank, sites currently include: Gilbertie's Herb Gardens, Fairfield University, Sacred Heart University, School Sisters of Notre Dame, the preschool program at St. Ann Academy, Home for the Brave, Main Enterprises, Marshalls, Merton House, and Chip's Family Restaurant.

Each site offers an authentic work experience and interaction with others in the community. The development of social and life skills is a primary focus of our program. "We believe that each person can contribute something," said Brady Cronin, Director of the Adult Program. "They can carry the box, or open it, or place an item in the bag. There's a role for everyone. It's a good feeling, especially at Christmas, to know we're giving back."



## *Tree Trimming Time at Knights of Columbus Museum*

Each year, Academy students create ornaments to decorate a tree at the Knights of Columbus Museum Christmas Tree Festival. The popular display of two dozen trees showcases the imagination of Connecticut Catholic schoolchildren who make ornaments in their classrooms and then visit the KOC Museum in New Haven to tour the Christmas exhibit and decorate a tree.



To match the museum's theme of

“Christmas in Europe,” our art teacher Megan Collins designed this year’s ornaments to showcase the natural beauty of Europe at Christmastime. Each student constructed a train from soap boxes and pasta wheels to “travel through Europe.” Ornaments painted with watercolor and salt were reminiscent of aurora borealis in winter. Sr. Cheryl’s class stencil painted on birch tree slices, calling to mind the forests of Europe, and Ms. Joanne and Ms. Patty’s classes created “lanterns” with Christmas scenes.

Last week the students took a field trip to the museum and decorated their tree, topping it with a display of silver balls etched with “Merry Christmas” in different languages. We are grateful to the Knights of Columbus for this festive opportunity to create art and get into the Christmas spirit.

The decorated trees can be viewed at the Museum until February 2, 2020. [Visit the KOC website](#) for more information.



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**Read about and view photos from the November  
[Mass Celebrating People with Special Needs.](#)**

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**Don't Miss the 2019 Christmas Pageant!**

***“A Cousins’ Christmas”***

**Friday, December 20, 10 a.m.**

**Saint Catherine Center**

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***We wish you and your family  
a Merry Christmas and Happy New Year!***

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