



## SAINT CATHERINE CENTER FOR *Special Needs*

### *Knowing They are Loved: Faith in Their Lives*

Every Friday during Prayer Service at Saint Catherine Academy, Philip offers a litany of intercessions, praying for his family, classmates, teachers, and individuals he knows who are sick or struggling. He even prays for Cobalt, his pet parakeet that passed away. It is not always easy to understand exactly what he is saying, but the sincerity of his petitions is clear. “Philip brings his whole self to prayer,” noted his teacher Sr. Cheryl Driscoll, RSM.

His mother, Karen Palilla, agreed. “When we’re in the car, Philip will often roll down the window, look up to the sky and say, ‘Thank you, Jesus, for the sky.’ He seems to be an unusually faith-filled individual.”

Although individuals with special needs cannot often describe their spiritual experience, its impact is evident in multiple ways—sometimes in exuberance, sometimes in calmness; in the enjoyment of music and ritual, but most especially in the joy that their presence brings to others.



Msgr. Robert Weiss, Pastor at St. Rose of Lima in Newtown and a Center Board member, referred the Palillas to the Academy when Philip and his family was struggling to decide what school environment would be best for him. Msgr. Weiss has witnessed Philip’s development over the years.

“Philip’s faith is simple, uncomplicated and joyful,” he said. “I have seen the influence he has had on our parishioners. His smile is contagious! When he was younger, he would often walk through the church at the Exchange of Peace reaching out to anyone who would shake his hand. That simple gesture of shaking hands reminded all of us what Jesus calls us to be as a community that brings peace and joy to the world, starting right here in Newtown.”

#### **A Community of Inclusion**

Spiritual development is an important part of the mission of Saint Catherine Center. To foster this, Academy students learn the basics of the Catholic faith in religious education class. The Prayer Service each Friday supports and reinforces that through prayer and song. The Center also hosts an annual Mass Celebrating People with Special Needs, where young people with disabilities from the Diocese receive the sacraments with their families participating.

“As a Catholic school, we are focused on the Gospel and what

Jesus teaches,” said Eric Spencer, Director of Education at the Academy. “It’s a simple message—of caring and being kind to each other, forgiving each other, and asking God for help when we need it. This is basic to all faiths, really. And all faiths are welcome at Saint Catherine Center.”

Kari Iyer, an Academy student, is Hindu. Her parents, Hema and Easwar, are familiar with the Catholic faith both from friends and from attending Catholic schools and faith-based colleges. Last December Kari was the Star of Bethlehem in the annual Christmas Pageant. “We were so happy that Kari was being included,” Easwar said. “For us what is important is for Kari to participate in events with her classmates and friends, so she has a sense of belonging to her school and her community.”

“Deep down in their hearts the students know they are loved, and they are grateful for it,” said Sr. Cheryl. “Each of them internalizes it in their own way. They show it more than they can talk about it.”



While there is no formal religious instruction in the Center’s Adult Program, many participants are part of a faith community with their families. Likewise, there is no requirement for staff to be religiously affiliated; however, many have active faith lives.

“Our overall goal is to create an environment with acceptance and inclusion at its core,” said Helen Burland, Executive Director, “where all feel valued and respected.”



### **Integrating into the Community**

Integrating into a faith community is often an especially difficult experience for families of children with special needs. Parents worry about their children’s behavior being disruptive and whether they will be welcome.

“When our daughters were very young, Mass was typically attended in the cry room with one or all of us crying!” said Michelle Rivelli, mother of Jessie in the Adult Program. “Those were difficult and stressful times, as Jessie wanted to run up and down the aisle and would throw a tantrum and scream.” She offered Jessie candy for appropriate

behavior. Physical reinforcement also helped to calm her. “I was a regular, standing in the back of the church, swinging her by her ankles,” Michelle said.

To help Jessie, Michelle and her husband Richard Zangrillo created a “social story” with pictures of parts of the Mass so that she could follow along. Jessie now enjoys the ritual, and when the family goes to church she is the one prompting them for the next reading or hymn.

“Although it is difficult to know what Jessie understands about God, she often smiles and displays more joy during the consecration and after receiving Communion,” Michelle said. “Because she is always fully present in any given moment, seeing her during Mass has enriched our own experience as we share this time with her.”

Deirdre Rajkowski, Ryan’s mother, had a similar story, with early years spent in the cry room with his brother. Now, Ryan looks forward to church and the opportunity to socialize with the priests and parishioners at the 7 a.m. Mass at St. Aloysius Church in New Canaan. “Now that he is older, church has become a great community,” Deirdre said. “We have to keep refocusing during Mass because he wants to wave, smile, and blow kisses to everyone. It’s clear from their reactions and the look on their faces that he’s had a significant impact on them, bringing them a little bit of

happiness to start their day.”

Mary Ross was too nervous to attend the rehearsal for her son Patrick’s First Holy Communion, even though they had practiced and involved the whole family. “The priest was not too sure Patrick understood,” she related. “He held up the host to our blind son and asked, ‘Patrick, do you know what this is?’ Bob [my husband] told me that Patrick responded in a loud voice, ‘It’s the Lord, Jesus Christ!’” Surprised and humbled, the priest then asked Patrick to pray for him.

She continued, “Along the way, many people have questioned what Patrick really knows. His deep understanding and connection to his faith stand as evidence to us that he is more in tune with what Jesus wanted us to know than most of us.”



### Different Avenues for Spiritual Experience

For Patrick, music is a spiritual experience. “Patrick loves the music in church,” said his mother, who attends St. Anthony of Padua Church in Fairfield. “He learned all the words and tunes to many hymns and sings them at home.” Among his favorites are “Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee” and “I Am the Bread of Life.” He can recognize the Responsorial Psalm by the music alone.

Anna Stowe, a student (pictured below), also enjoys music and camaraderie in her church community at St. Lawrence Church in Shelton. For a while she sang in the C4Y Diocesan Youth

Choir, and is now taking singing lessons. “I like to sing because it makes me feel happy and energized,” she said. “On Eagle’s Wings” is one of her favorite hymns. “The song makes people feel better who are having tough times.” Anna likes to talk to people at church and hopes one day to be a Reader.

Ryan also enjoys the socializing at St. Aloysius. Every few months, the parish hosts a gathering for the special needs members and church teenagers called “St. A’s Buddies,” where they play games, sing, and dance. This type of peer interaction is beneficial to all participants.

As Jessie’s mother Michelle said, “Our daughter’s presence at Mass demonstrates the simple yet profound message of how a diverse community of people coming together can share in God’s message of love, regardless of their challenges.”

“It is as if, through their vulnerability, our students and adults are more open to receive and share God’s love,” said Helen. “There is something for all of us to learn in that. As we enter the Easter season, a time of renewal, it is an especially good time to contemplate this. Faith is ever present at Saint Catherine Center – a living and authentic expression of God’s love.”



### [Read parents’ stories in their own words](#)

Photos (from top):

*Philip offers his prayers for others during Friday Prayer Service; Philip after church with Msgr. Robert Weiss at St. Rose of Lima Church in Newtown; Kari as the Star of Bethlehem in the*

annual Christmas Pageant; Michelle Rivelli and Richard Zangrillo with their daughters Jessie and Christine at their First Holy Communion in 2004 at Our Lady of Victory in West Haven; Ryan after church with Rev. David Franklin and Rev. Rob Kinnally, Pastor, at St. Aloysius Parish in New Canaan; Anna with Rev. Ciprian Bejan, Pastor at St. Lawrence Parish in Shelton.

*We wish you and your family  
a Blessed Easter!*

