

Four Friends Journey from OMC to the Ivy League

By Jim Gauger

A Catholic education consists of values, that if properly learned and nourished, will last a lifetime. A Catholic education can open up many opportunities in a world that competes for the best and the brightest. In the case of four young women from Chestnut Hill, their Catholic education led to the Ivy League campus of the University of Pennsylvania in West Philadelphia.

Louisa Jacquinto, Sarah Foley, Chelsea Aleo and Maeve Flynn are sophomores at Penn. They began their educational journey together at Our Mother of Consolation Parish School (OMC) in Chestnut Hill. They continued their academic pursuits when they were accepted at Mount Saint Joseph's Academy in Flourtown. The four students graduated with academic honors from the Mount in 2009, and all were accepted at Penn.

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Jacquinto and Foley started at OMC in Pre-K, while Aleo and Flynn joined up in Kindergarten. All speak of friendship and the values they learned in those early years at OMC.

"Raising a child is not an exact science," said Bruce Hagy, principal at OMC. "It takes everyone - teachers, parents and students working together, collaborating and supporting each other - for it to work.

Catholic schools in general and certainly OMC School are environments where parents, teachers and children work together. Louisa, Sarah, Chelsea and Maeve are examples of this kind of cooperative effort. Their success is the result of solid family support, a challenging academic environment at OMC and Mount Saint Joseph's Academy, and their own supreme effort."

"I trace my foundations [of Catholic faith] to OMC," said Jacquinto, who is an English major at Penn. "The school played an important part of my life. The way religion was taught, it was not an isolated aspect of life."

Jacquinto said William Brennan, eighth-grade teacher at OMC, was a big influence. "He gave me a strong foundation in writing, presentation and speaking skills," she explained. "We would do historical role play - get up in front of the class. I was nervous, but it was really good practice."

Brennan also made a big impact on Aleo, who is premed at Penn. "He was one of the best teachers I had," she said. "He prepared me well. He challenged all of us and that made high school a lot easier. I remember an intense research paper in his class. When I got to high school I had done a lot of what other kids hadn't. He taught a lot of good study skills and instilled Catholic values in us."

All four were honor students at OMC. In 2005, they applied to the Mount and were accepted. "I guess it wasn't too surprising that we were all accepted to the Mount," Jacquinto said. "But when we were all accepted at Penn it was really a surprise. I had known Sarah from pre-school (at OMC). I called Chelsea - who lives two blocks away - and we were so excited!"

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“OMC shaped who I am, how I see things in life, my morals,” said Foley, who is also premed at Penn. Foley said Sister Marcelline Marie, her first-grade teacher, got her off to a good start. “She taught us how to be polite, how to present ourselves.” At the Mount, Foley was inspired by physics instructor Robert Foell. “He was engaging and he always had time for me,” she said.

As for the years at the Mount, Aleo said, “It was good to have close friends go there. Penn was my top choice for college. I knew Louisa and Sarah were interested, too. It’s such a good school. There were eight students from the Mount that were accepted that year.” But only four that had been together since kindergarten at OMC. Aleo said she did community service at OMC and that she has continued in that work through college. “I volunteered to go to Peru over Christmas break, setting up medical clinics,” Aleo said.

Flynn, a communications major at Penn, also looks at OMC as a moral anchor. “I learned about tolerance,” she said. “The school is very diverse. I was exposed to so many different people that it was easy to put into practice what we were being taught.” Sister Marie Leahy made a big impact on Flynn. “She was our fifth-grade teacher,” Flynn said. “She was very fair. She very much wanted to listen to the student. It helped make sense of the academic rules and the behavior rules.”

Principal Hagy says that OMC is dedicated to an equal balance between Catholic Values and Academic Excellence where developing students academically and intellectually is equally as important as developing them into good people and good citizens. “Since Catholic values pervade all teaching in Catholic schools, students are provided with a framework for making good decisions in their lives based on the teaching of Jesus Christ,” he said. “Consequently, and in addition to being bright young women, Louisa, Sarah, Chelsea and Maeve are wonderful human beings. They are sterling examples of a Catholic school education.”