

CATHOLIC STANDARD



For D.C. children, scholarships offer

Opportunity to succeed

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CATHOLIC SCHOOLS

Mother sees scholarships as 'grace from God'

D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program provides expanded educational options for city's families

By Kelly Seegers
Catholic Standard

Every morning at 3:15 a.m., Juliette Randolph's alarm goes off. She wakes up, watches the news, and gets ready, before waking up her three children, Jalen, Ava, and Briah, and helping them prepare for school.

With the children dressed in their red and blue uniforms, the family leaves their home at 6 a.m. and takes the Metro for about an hour. After exiting the station, Jalen gets on a shuttle to St. Anselm's Abbey School in Washington, where he is in sixth grade. The other three take a bus to St. Anthony Catholic School in Washington, where Ava is in third grade, Briah is in first grade, and Randolph works as a pre-kindergarten instructional assistant.

The early morning wake-up is a sacrifice that Randolph said she is willing to make in order to ensure that her children receive a quality education, which is made possible by the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program (OSP). Jalen, Ava and Briah are all recipients of the scholarship, which provides children from low-income families in Washington with funds to attend private schools.

The program is funded under the Scholarships for Opportunity and Results (SOAR) Act, and is the only federally funded voucher program in the country. It has provided more than 6,000 students with scholarships since the 2004-05 school year.

Before Randolph knew about the Opportunity Scholarship, she was homeschooling her son, Jalen, and one day, he told her, "Mommy, I want to go to school."

So, Randolph enrolled him in a public charter school for kindergarten. But Jalen, who last year tested in the 94th percentile of 10 year olds nationally, was not being challenged academically. Before long, Randolph learned that Jalen was also being bullied at the school, and she decided to pull him out at the end of the year.

Around that time, Randolph ran into someone who told her about OSP. At that point, the deadline for applying for the scholarship had already passed, but Randolph was determined, and walked into the program's office to explain Jalen's situation.

"By the grace of God, he was given a scholarship," Randolph said.

To qualify for the Opportunity Scholarship, the family must reside in D.C., have a child in K-12, and either qualify for food stamps or have an income that does not ex-



CS PHOTO BY JACLYN LIPPELMANN

Juliette Randolph is surrounded by her three children, (standing from left to right) Briah Randolph, a first grader at St. Anthony Catholic School in Washington; Ava Thayer, a St. Anthony's third grader; and Jalen Thayer, a sixth grader at St. Anselm's Abbey School in Washington. The three children all receive D.C. Opportunity Scholarships that enable them to attend Catholic schools.

ceed 185 percent of the federal poverty line. The program gives parents like Randolph, who is a single mother, the ability to make a choice about their child's education that they otherwise wouldn't have the luxury of making. As a result, the children have opportunities that would normally only be available to those whose parents have the money to afford private schools.

"People don't realize how much an impact it has on kids if parents have a choice

(of where to send them to school)," Randolph said. "...If my kids went to a school nearby (where they live), they wouldn't want to go to school."

Since being enrolled in private schools, Jalen has had the opportunity to go white water rafting, to join the chess club, and greet Pope Francis in front of the Apostolic Nunciature during his visit in 2015, which are all things that Randolph said he wouldn't have been able to do in public schools, and,

as a single parent of three kids, she wouldn't have been able to afford the cost of her children's education without the Opportunity Scholarships.

"I like that my school has lots of extracurricular activities," said Jalen. "They challenge me more."

After Jalen enrolled in St. Anthony, Randolph began volunteering at the school library as a way to give back. Before long, she was working in the aftercare program, and soon got a job as a pre-kindergarten instructional assistant. It was important to the people at St. Anthony to keep the siblings at the same school, so the school contributed money to help the children stay together, and over time Ava and Briah also received Opportunity Scholarships. This is Jalen's first year at St. Anselm's.

"I like that my sister and my mom are at my school," said Ava. Briah chimed in, "Me too!"

Now, Randolph said she tells lots of people about the Opportunity Scholarship, even when she is on the bus or the subway.

"I give back because it was given to me," she said.

While they live in a difficult neighborhood, Randolph said what matters for them is the things that go on within their own home, and "we do a lot of praying."

"Where I live, I feel like I have to shelter them," said Randolph. "But I can't shelter them from everything. And because they go to a religious school they understand you have to forgive."

Randolph said she thinks her purpose in life is to help others, and she tries to teach her children that, which is a lesson their Catholic schools reinforce. She recalled one instance where they were walking back from McDonalds, and she gave her food to a homeless man who they passed by, since she knew she could just get food at home. After she did that, Jalen said, "Since you gave him your food, you can have half of my food."

"I'm trying to show them this is how Christ would want us to live, despite where we live," Randolph said.

Randolph is not Catholic, but after her children enrolled in Catholic school, they were all baptized, and those who are old enough have received First Communion. Since working at St. Anthony, Randolph has become a certified catechist.

"As long as I know they are getting that proper education and that religious aspect and they are happy, I'm happy," Randolph said.

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Randolph also appreciates the fact that Catholic schools have uniforms, because they don't have to worry about whether one kid has something that another does not if they all dress the same way.

"Even though we live below the poverty line, they would never know that feeling of not having," Randolph said.

One day, she asked Jalen, "Would you rather be rich mentally or financially?" Jalen chose mentally—which is something that the Opportunity Scholarship makes a reality.

"The Opportunity Scholarship Program has allowed us to open our doors even wider to those most in need," said Michael Thomasian, the principal of St. Anthony. "We are able to welcome and educate more students from D.C. and strengthen their academic foundation while instilling virtues and discipline."

Thomasian said some of the first opportunity scholars who attended St. Anthony are now in college, and they would not have been able to attend the high schools or the colleges that they did without first receiving the scholarship. One student who attended St. Anthony thanks to OSP now has a full ride to Dartmouth University.

Randolph said her children receive greater support as a result of attending Catholic schools. One of Jalen's teachers once noticed that he would always complain about his stomach hurting at a certain time in the morning, so she asked why. Jalen said it was because they leave home so early and he doesn't want to eat breakfast at that time. Now, they have made a special exception to allow Jalen to eat something.

"A lot of people don't know the impact it has not just on the child but on the family as a whole," said Randolph, as the relief from the financial burden allows her to focus on other aspects of parenting, and the quality of the school environments improves her

children's level of happiness.

"The kids are happy to go to school," she said, adding that they get to "learn about God" and "pray whenever [they] want...it doesn't get much better than that."

When they leave school at the end of the day, it can sometimes take them three hours to get home. Once they get home, the kids do their homework, and if they finish early, Randolph gives them extra homework on top of what the school gave, such as math and spelling exercises online, reading a book, or practicing handwriting.

"I always tell them, the three most important things in life are..." Randolph started, before Jalen completed her sentence with, "God, family, and education."

When the U.S. Congress returns on Nov. 14, it will have a few weeks to pass an omnibus budget funding the federal government. If the budget includes The Scholarships for Opportunity and Results Reauthorization Act, it will reauthorize the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship program through 2021. If not, the program may be funded on a yearly basis, which, according to the Archdiocese of Washington Catholic Schools Office, will not provide the support and stability needed for its growth and success.

Those interested in supporting the legislation can voice their support through a petition aimed at reminding congressional leaders about the legislation's importance for the city and its children. For more information or to get involved, contact schools@adw.org.

"I am and have always been a strong proponent of the Opportunity Scholarship Program," said Thomasian. "...Parents should have the right to choose the school that best aligns with their values and meets their family's needs. I will continue to write letters, attend hearings, and support the program in every way I can. All children deserve a strong start. This is OSP"

Events around the archdiocese

To celebrate the feast day of its patron, Saint John Paul II National Shrine is inviting youth and young adults to join World Youth Day alumni for an event in their series called "World Youth Day Unite" on Saturday Oct. 22. The admission is free, and the celebration will include live music, food trucks, film screenings, faith formation talks, a vocation fair, adoration and confession, the unveiling of a new Saint John Paul II statue, and a Saint John Paul II Feast Day Mass. The event will be from noon to 9 p.m. That shrine is located at 3900 Harewood Road, N.E. Call 202-635-5400 for more information, or go to its website at www.jp2shrine.org.

On Nov. 5, the Calvert County Deanery will host an event called Mercy Fest, which will feature music by Jesse Manibusan, witness talks given by someone from each of the five parishes in Calvert County, and a Mass followed by individual or family blessings and dinner. It will be held in the Family Life Center at St. John Vianney Parish, 105 Vianney Lane, Prince Frederick, and will run from 3:30 to 8:30 p.m. For more information, go to the event's website at <http://calvertmercyfest.weebly.com>.

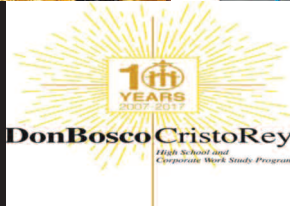
St. Paul Catholic Church in Damascus will host its 3rd annual Harvest of Hope and Healing Gala on Nov. 12, to benefit its clinic

in El Rosario, Honduras. The gala will be held in the Rosborough Cultural Arts Center at Asbury Methodist Village in Gaithersburg, with special guest Jorge Alberto Milla Reyes, ambassador of Honduras to the United States. Cocktails will begin at 6:30 p.m. and dinner will be served at 7:30 p.m. Tickets are \$125. For more information about the clinic, its upcoming mission trips and to purchase tickets for the gala, visit the gala website at www.galaforhonduras.weebly.com or call 301-253-2027.

A Black Catholic History Month event, "Celebrating Steadfast Witness: Honoring the Black Catholic Experience in the Archdiocese of Washington," will be held Nov. 12 at Our Lady of Perpetual Help Church, 1600 Morris Road, S.E., Washington. The event will begin with praise and worship at 4 p.m., followed by Mass at 4:30 p.m. Two former heads of the archdiocese's Office of Black Catholics will be honored - Jacqueline Wilson and Deacon Al Turner - along with Msgr. Raymond East, the pastor of St. Teresa of Avila Parish in Washington who is a nationally known evangelist. Washington Auxiliary Bishop Mario Dorsonville will celebrate the Mass. The event is sponsored by the archdiocese's Office of Cultural Diversity and Outreach.



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