

Students With Disabilities Find 'A Family' in Catholic Schools

▲ by Kelly Sankowski

FORESTVILLE, Md. (CNS) – When asked what his favorite thing is about attending Bishop McNamara High School in Forestville, Md., 10th-grade student Raymond Tetschner said: "It is a family."

Raymond is the first student to be a part of the school's new St. Andre Program, which is designed to support students with intellectual disabilities in an inclusive setting.

"I've been in Catholic education for 30 years, and I think a Catholic school should be a place for all children," said Marco Clark, president and CEO of Bishop McNamara.

"Often, there are barriers of socioeconomics, barriers of learning styles, barriers of geography. One of those barriers should not be intellectual disabilities. If we are truly a pro-life community, that means we need to be pro-lifespan."

The new program, which complements the school's already existing St. Joseph Program for students with high-incidence disabilities, has been in the

works for years as the school has been researching how to develop it.

Abigail Greer, the school's director of student support, and Anne Dillon, who now serves as the director of special education for the Archdiocese of Washington, visited the Academy of the Holy Cross in Kensington last year to see how they run their program that serves students with developmental and intellectual disabilities. Then, just a few months later, Greer met Michelle Tetschner, Raymond's mom, who had recently moved to the Washington area. The teen called the meeting a "God-cident."

"It was always my dream to have Raymond in Catholic high school," said his mom, who recalled how in Arizona, four Catholic elementary schools said "no" to accepting Raymond before one said "yes."

"We had a real crisis of faith when four said 'no,'" she explained, adding that sending him to a Catholic school "is especially deep in our hearts" because Raymond was adopted through Catholic



Photo © Jaclyn Lippelmann, Catholic Standard

▲ Raymond Tetschner, center, studies with fellow students in 2018 at Bishop McNamara H.S. in Forestville, Md. He is the first student to be a part of the school's new program to support students with intellectual disabilities in an inclusive setting.

social services.

After Tetschner and Greer met, Raymond applied to the school and was accepted, and the family moved to be closer to Bishop McNamara.

"We were ready to say 'yes' and they were ready to say 'yes' to us," Greer told the Catholic Standard, the archdiocesan newspaper.

To fund the new program, Bishop McNamara High School received a grant

from the Catholic Coalition of Special Education, which has awarded nearly 60 grants to 30 Catholic schools in eight Maryland counties totaling more than \$1 million since 2004. The program also received funding from Tribute 21, a component fund of the Community Foundation for the National Capital Region, dedicated to raising awareness and raising funds to support those with Down syndrome.



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