

# Senior Stories from Lasallian Schools

*Who am I? How have I grown?*

*What have I learned? Where am I headed?*

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FAITH, SERVICE, COMMUNITY. A HUMAN AND CHRISTIAN EDUCATION. ENTER TO LEARN, LEAVE TO SERVE. THESE SHORT PHRASES ENCAPSULATE SOME OF THE TRAITS OF THE EDUCATION THAT WE CALL LASALLIAN. THEY ARE NOT ABSTRACT FORMULAS, BUT LIVING COMMITMENTS, AND THEY ARE EMBODIED IN THE STUDENTS WHO IN OUR SCHOOLS ARE CHALLENGED, SUPPORTED, AND GUIDED TO MAKE A LASALLIAN EDUCATION TRULY THEIR OWN. SIGNS OF FAITH ASKED SOME SENIORS FROM THE DISTRICT OF SAN FRANCISCO TO SHARE WHAT THEIR LASALLIAN EDUCATION HAS MEANT TO THEM. HERE ARE THEIR STORIES.

*Andrew Flynn  
Christian Brothers High School  
Sacramento, California*

Andrew Flynn's years at Christian Brothers High School have opened his eyes to the importance of service in the community. "Service has become a big part of my life," says the senior, who has volunteered regularly with about 15 students and one teacher to bring breakfast to the Wellspring Women's Center, a drop-in center

offering services to women and children. Twice a week the group arrives at school at 6 a.m. to start cooking breakfast in the school's kitchen.

Andrew has been doing it for four



years, even though, as he says wryly, “I’m not a morning person.” When he was a freshman, his brother, a senior at the school, volunteered for the early morning cooking duty and, says Andrew, “He was my ride.” The volunteers take the breakfast to the center and then hurry back to school before classes begin. It’s not easy, says Andrew, “But it makes you feel good to know you’re helping other people.”

Christian Brothers High School is the second oldest high school in Sacramento. Situated in one of the poorest neighborhoods of the city, it serves a student body of about 1,050 young men and women from all social and economic levels of the Sacramento community. For Andrew’s family, Christian Brothers High School is a family affair. “It has been a tradition of my family to go there,” he says. His brother, Ted; father, Tom; and grandfather, John, graduated from the school and his mother, Rita Spillane, serves on the Board of Trustees.

His four years here have been a time of “great academics,” says Andrew, an honors student, who has been accepted to Dartmouth and plans to focus on math and science, perhaps majoring in physics or applied math. Showing some visitors the school’s new Science, Math, and Technology Wing, Andrew

drops in on science teacher Bernie Eckel at work in his classroom. “The teacher-student relationship here is great,” says Andrew. “You can chat with the teachers any time.” Eckel agrees, with a smile, that

there certainly are students who need his help, but Andrew is not one of them: “With guys like Andrew, Mickey Mouse could teach this class and they would still get it all.”

In addition to being one of the top science students in the school, Andrew is the founder of the school’s rock-climbing club. Rock-climbing is a passion with him, but is just one of several pursuits. He is also an Eagle Scout and an excellent pianist. What it means to be a student in a Lasallian school was amplified for Andrew

when he went on a Lasallian leadership retreat with students from 11 Lasallian schools.

“Let us remember,” a speaker said. And Andrew heard the chorus that is echoed in every Lasallian school, “that we are in the holy presence of God.” That moment, he says, made him more deeply aware of the spiritual bond he shares with the wider Lasallian community.

Asked his take on the Lasallian maxim “Enter to Learn, Leave to Serve,” Andrew replies that serving is already a habit that the school has helped him to create. “Over four years, service has just become a part of my life.”



*Lidija Simlesa  
La Salle High School  
Milwaukie, Oregon*

Lidija Simlesa was 12 years old when her family migrated to the U.S. from war-torn Bosnia. The economic situation and educational outlook in her native country were unpromising, and her parents wanted Lidija to attend a private school in the U.S.

When she arrived in the U.S., she first attended a Catholic school in Southeast Portland.

As a freshman applicant to La Salle High in Milwaukie, she received a four-year scholarship based on her grades and her parents' income, and she is now in her final year.

"I wanted to go to a small Catholic high school and La Salle was my number one choice," she says, adding that she was afraid of attending a big public school. At La Salle, she found a safe environment where she easily made friends. Because the school is small, she says, "you really get to know everybody. It's a community, it's a big family."

The co-ed school of about 650 students serves a student population from the six counties surrounding the greater Portland and Vancouver metropolitan areas.

La Salle Principal Bill George says offering a Catholic college preparatory education to kids who would not be able to dream of it otherwise "is what we're supposed to do." Some people think that youths from lower economic levels will not do well academically – but they do, he says. "Lidija has

done remarkably well. She's hard working and she does what she needs to do," he says. "She's a great kid and a wonderful success story."

Lidija has nothing but praise for her years at La Salle. "It has been a great experience altogether. I've gained everything I wanted. It's great preparation for college," says the senior who has a 3.6 grade point average. She would quickly recommend La Salle to a prospective student, she says, because "I know they'll get a great education; they'll grow and mature. And they'll be surrounded by great individuals -- students and



teachers -- in a faith environment."

At La Salle, she says the classes and teachers challenged her. "In class discussions, you're allowed to be open minded. My ideas are respected," Lidija says, adding that she sometimes interjects how things are done in her native country and culture.

If she is having problems in class, the teachers also know to send a note home to her parents, she says. "They push me to do my best.



They're always guiding and helping me."

Her years at La Salle have helped her to mature in her religious faith. As a Catholic, she has learned more about her faith because "at La Salle, they relate to what's going on with us," says Lidija. Discussions have ranged from "regular life" to alcohol to "how our faith can get us through hard times," she says. Although she is a regular churchgoer, she did not relate her Catholicism to everyday life until getting those perspectives at school, she says.

"They encouraged me to use prayer as a healing process," says Lidija. "They taught me the power of it. And meditating -- they taught me to pray to calm yourself down. That helped me a lot, too."

Community service opportunities through the school have also helped her to express her faith, says Lidija, who has visited with the elderly at retirement homes and has served food at a homeless shelter.

"I can relate my faith to everything I do. ... The small things matter. God works through me while I'm doing small things."

Although undecided on which college to attend, Lidija says she wants to study international business and international affairs in the hopes of eventually working abroad in some capacity in the U.S. diplomatic service.

## *Ralph Pineda Cathedral High School Los Angeles, California*

Ralph Pineda has two homes in the tough East Los Angeles area where he lives. His first is with his parents and younger brother. But that second home is not a house -- it is a school. Switching from the public school system to the private Cathedral High School when he started ninth grade gave Ralph a new lease on life. "It is totally different. Cathedral is like a family. Everyone knows each other. The teachers are there for you," he says emphatically. "Any time I need help, they're there for me. It's really like another home to me."

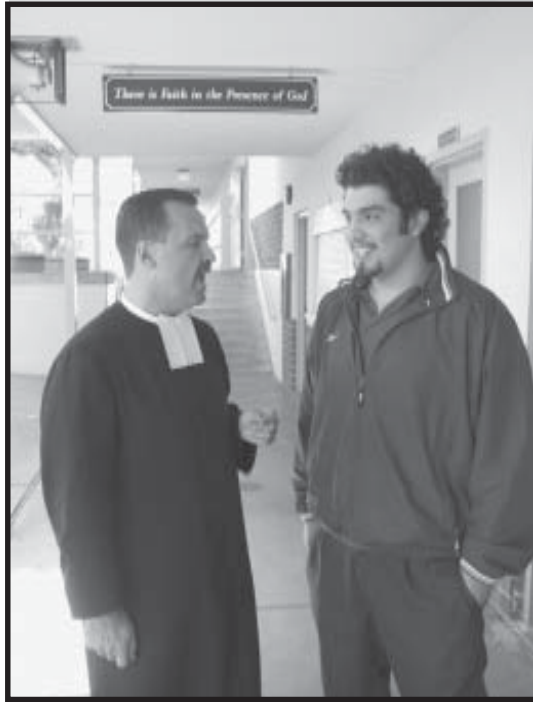
Had he attended the local public school, he would have been dealing with an atmosphere tense with gang rivalries, he says. When he is home, Ralph says, he usually stays inside close to his family because of the gang activity in his neighborhood.

Cathedral High School is an all-male school of about 600 students located in the shadow of Dodger Stadium. The

school has traditionally served young men from the oldest and poorest neighborhoods of Los Angeles, with most students coming from the Latino and African-American neighbor-



hoods of the South Central and Eastside areas. In a community where a 50 percent dropout rate is all too common, 99 percent of Cathedral graduates, most of whom are Latino, go on to college.



Ralph attended Cathedral on a four-year scholarship, playing varsity football, baseball and basketball all four years, as well as participating in a leadership workshop when he was a junior and working for the school committee that sets up rallies.

Ralph heard about the school from a friend and then he and his parents attended an open house. His parents were excited to hear school officials talk about how many Cathedral students attended college, which is what they wanted for Ralph. Now the school is becoming a family tradition -- next year Ralph's younger brother will attend.

The Lasallian mission of the school is something Ralph has learned about in religion class, where students have been instructed about Saint John Baptist de La Salle and the Christian Brothers.

Ralph says what he has learned has made a big difference in him personally as well as in his family. He says he tries to take home the lessons he's learned to share with his family and he believes the family is closer because of it. In

fact, the Pinedas are living out the Lasallian mission by taking in one of Ralph's friends who was kicked out of his house.

Ralph will be attending San Jose State University on a football scholarship this fall where he will study sociology. He says he hopes to become a teacher and to work in a capacity where he can help people.

The classes at Cathedral have challenged him, Ralph says, quickly adding, "The teachers are there to help you. It all depends on you, if you're going to do the work. You've got to work hard; they're just getting you ready for the future. They want to see us succeed. They're like our parents -- they're getting us ready for the future."

Attending Cathedral has brought him closer to other people and has helped him to know better his own strengths and weaknesses, and now, he says, "I feel ready for the world."

## *At a Lasallian School :*

- ❖ *there is respect for each student as a unique person*
- ❖ *the education offered is excellent*
- ❖ *the adjective "Christian" is truly merited*
- ❖ *there is solidarity with the poor*
- ❖ *there is concern for justice and peace*
- ❖ *the staff practices the values it strives to teach*
- ❖ *the community knows itself as part of the tradition of Saint John Baptist de La Salle*

*The integration of these characteristics gives a school its Lasallian identity.*

*(adapted from an essay by Brother John Jobnaton, FSC)*

*Sarah Eberle  
Saint Mary's College  
Moraga, California*

The first time Sarah Eberle visited Saint Mary's College of California, she knew it was where she wanted to go to school. "As soon as I walked on campus, I got this vibrant feeling of welcoming," says Sarah, who traveled to



the college with her parents from Phoenix, Arizona. On the way home, she says her father started crying on the airplane, saying he knew this was the right place for his only child to go to college. Her mother started to cry too. "We knew this was the right place for me."

"I wanted to have an identity, to have the professors know my name and know my strengths and weaknesses," says Sarah. "I didn't want to be just a number."

One of the hallmarks of a Lasallian education is a close teacher-student relationship, and that is exactly what Sarah found at Saint Mary's. Among the favorite teachers she mentions are Nancy

Struthers, Hoang Vu, Lynnyonne Cotton, and James Temple in psychology, and Felicidad Oberholzer and Rabbi Michael Oblath in religious studies.

"They are so willing to help; they're always there to help," says Sarah, who is completing a double major in psychology and religious studies. "Professor Vu sets high standards and is willing to help you succeed in reaching those standards," Sarah says, adding that in working so hard to help the students it seems "Professor Vu never sleeps. He'll send you an e-mail at two o'clock in the morning."

In addition to carrying a double major, Sarah has taken part in a variety of campus activities. She is the secretary for the Student Alumni Association, a justice on the student government's Judicial Tribunal, a member of the Alcohol Review Board, vice president of Psi Chi (the national honor society for psychology), and a Eucharistic minister at Masses in the College chapel. She has also helped with freshmen orientation for three years, and has guided visitors on campus tours during her sophomore and junior years.



All that is impressive, of course, perhaps even more so when you take into account that Sarah has had to deal all her life with the effects of a stroke that she suffered in her mother's womb three days

before she was born. The lingering physical effects include problems with her gait and susceptibility to fatigue.

Her various activities gave her a taste of helping her brothers and sisters in need, she says, and that made



her thirsty for more. The main thing she takes from her Lasallian education, Sarah says, is “the need to serve.”

After college, she plans to join the Lasallian Volunteers, a program in which college graduates do a year or two of direct service, mostly in works sponsored by the Christian Brothers, as they share in the apostolic and community life of the Brothers. Sarah hopes that her volunteer year will involve work with campus ministry or religious education. Afterward she hopes to go to a Lasallian graduate school for a master’s degree in pastoral counseling.

“Saint Mary’s has been a true gift and I’m glad God led me here,” she says, adding that she has met her true friends -- the people who will be her friends for life -- among her peers, the faculty and staff.

“You take away a foundation of friends and love and community. To me, Saint Mary’s is an extension of my family,” Sarah says. “Graduation is bittersweet. I know it’s time, but it will be sad to leave the Saint Mary’s community. It’s been a great four years.”

## *David Holquin Saint Mary’s College Moraga, California*

David Holquin is emphatic and enthusiastic about his Lasallian education: “I know the Brothers would go to the ends of the earth to provide for their students.” Holquin has been at Saint Mary’s for four years. When the time came to decide which college to attend, he says: “I knew my experiences at Christian Brothers High School in Sacramento were unique and fulfilling and educational. Why would I want to go to anything other than a Lasallian college? I knew that the Brothers would be there to support me and my family. The Brothers always become a part of your family.”

What does a Lasallian college teach him that another might not have? “Reciprocity,” David says. “For me, as an individual, to give back what I’ve been given so much of. If I am a businessman, I need to give financially. If I am a teacher, I need to reach students. If I am a nurse, I need to see this individual through the eyes of God.” In short, he says, “Whatever we do in our lives, to give back and to do good.”

Every aspect of a Lasallian college’s life — from classes to the residence halls — is educational, says David, who worked as a resident adviser. “A Lasallian education does teach the whole person, and once you know the Lasallian educational mission, you can’t be idle with it. My parents instilled in me that if much is given to you, much is



required from you, and what I've learned in my schooling has facilitated that."

Community service is part of the Lasallian package, and David volunteered his time as a tutor for two years at Saint Mary's College High School in Berkeley. This year he is the student body presi-

dent at the College, an office that he calls "being a servant leader. I act as a voice for the students as well as representing Lasallian education outside the college." He was an enthusiastic participant and valuable presence during the District Assembly on Mission in summer 2002.

David does not know exactly what he will do with his bachelor's degree in economics and minor in psychology.

One option is to become a teacher at a Lasallian school, eventually getting his master's degree and going into school administration, followed by a doctorate so he



could teach at the college level. Another option is government service to effect "positive change on a larger scale."

He is also considering becoming a businessman with a goal of eventually setting up an educational foundation.

"I'm open to the spirit. Wherever the Lord takes me, I'm willing to go."

Although he has considered

exploring a possible vocation as a Christian Brother, he does not see himself heading in that direction at this point. "I do see a lifelong relationship, however. The Brothers leave an indelible, lifelong mark on the hearts of their students, and I feel I will always have a family there. For the Brothers, *I would go to the ends of the earth.*"



*These five students and hundreds like them are graduating and taking the next steps in their lives. Credit goes to all our graduates for their hard work and perseverance, and credit goes to the parents and teachers, counselors and coaches, mentors and friends, who have answered the challenge that John Baptist de La Salle posed to the early Christian Brothers more than three centuries ago:*

*"Do you have such faith that it is able to touch the hearts of your students and to inspire them with the Christian spirit? This is the greatest miracle you could perform, and the one that God asks of you, since this is the purpose of your work."* ■