



**RI religious education program for autistic children starts**

Written by KALUNIAN, KIM

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By KIM KALUNIAN

For Catholic families, sending their children to Confraternity of Christian Doctrine (CCD) classes is an easy thing to do. But for families whose children are autistic or non-verbal, the issue of educating their children about religion becomes a bit more difficult. Just in time for their 75th anniversary, St. Peter's Church is helping to make a difference and to make history in the Providence Diocese by beginning a faith formation program geared toward children with autism and other developmental delays. St. Peter's Elementary Faith Formation Coordinator, Margaret Andreozzi, is spearheading the program.

Andreozzi's idea to create this program came about four years ago, when she met a boy named Josh Langevin. Langevin's family was deeply devoted to the church, and his mother and sisters attended mass every week. Because attending mass was difficult for Josh, an autistic boy, he and his father stayed home while the women of the family went to church. Josh's mother sincerely wanted him to learn about religion, just as his sisters had, but felt there was no way to teach him.

"There were not a lot of places for parents to turn," said Andreozzi. Parents wanted their children to make their Sacraments, but when they were unable to learn in a regular classroom setting, the normally simple task became nearly impossible.

Determined to change Josh's and other children's situations, Andreozzi attended a workshop at Bryant University a year ago to learn methods used for teaching autistic children. From there, she worked in conjunction with Roberta Zimmerly, a parent of an autistic child from the Autism Project of Rhode Island, to get the program on its feet. With her support and input, Andreozzi researched autistic teaching methods, and attended another workshop at Bryant University, where she learned of a successful curriculum and computer program of visual aids to teach the children their lessons.

Now, four years after meeting Josh and his family, Andreozzi is ready to tell Catholic families statewide about the program.

"We needed something like this in our diocese," she said. Although there is another program in the state for children with disabilities, this is the first program in the Providence Diocese made specifically for children on the autism spectrum. Andreozzi, with the help of Reverend Roger Gagné, the church's pastor, is making this program available to the entire diocese in hopes that it will grow and spread throughout the state.

"My dream is that maybe this can get into other parishes. I can't do this alone," she said.

Andreozi hopes to start the classes in September and meet weekly until April, like regular faith formation classes. Although she says it depends on the needs of the families that inquire about the class, the program is best suited for children ages 7 to 14.

Because the class will move at a different pace than regular CCD classes, Andreozzi says each child will be able to finish the curriculum in their own time. Her main goal is to eventually integrate the children back into regular faith formation classes, or have them return to their own parishes.

Although the classes have not yet begun, Andreozzi said there have already been success stories from St. Peter's. In January, a non-verbal boy received his first sacrament, and Arielle Plante, an autistic 17-year-old Pilgrim High School student, earned all three of her sacraments.

“Arielle was encouraged to leave the parish at 7 years old,” Andreozzi recounted. “Now, ten years later, she's received all of her sacraments and feels very much a part of the church.”

With the success of children like Arielle to reflect upon, Andreozzi is confident there will be many more success stories. Currently, there are six mildly autistic children enrolled in the faith formation program at St. Peter's. Andreozzi hopes to be able to suit their needs in the class, and will be teaching in coordination with the Autism Society. She would also like the parents to be involved, teaching their own and other children. So far, she's received several inquiries about enrollment, and even people looking to volunteer.

There will be an informational meeting on Thursday, March 27 at 7 p.m. in the Crèche Room of St. Peter's Church administration building. Because Andreozzi wants to ensure the quality of the class, she asks that all who are interested call and register to avoid too many children per classroom. To contact Margaret Andreozzi, call 461-5691. For additional information, visit <http://stpeterswarwick.catholicweb.com>