

# Faith haven

Madison's tiny St. Ambrose Academy aims to make saintly scholars



By Susan Troller  
*The Capital Times*

It may come as a surprise that Madison has two Catholic high schools.

One — Edgewood High School of the Sacred Heart — has a long history and a big presence in the community. The other is very small, rather new and nearly invisible.

But that doesn't mean St. Ambrose Academy doesn't have big ambitions.

In fact, Principal John Gillett says that the overarching mission of St. Ambrose is to develop Catholic saints.

The potential saints of St. Ambrose — 15 girls and 13 boys scattered through grades 6 through 12 — usually dress in khaki trousers and polo shirts. The students adhere to a simple, strict dress code that is part of a conservative atmosphere that encourages students to focus first on their spiritual lives and second on an academically rigorous program.

The school recently made news when two out of three of its senior class members were named semifinalists for National Merit Scholarships. Senior Robert Marsland nailed the only perfect SAT score in Madison this year.

But that exceptional worldly accomplishment is not even close to what matters most at St. Ambrose.

Founded in 2003 by a handful of families who were inspired by the late Pope John Paul II's directive to take charge of their children's education, the school's parents, staff and students say it is a place unlike others in Madison, a haven where they can feel free to let their faith be the center of every activity.

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MIKE DeVRIES PHOTOS/THE CAPITAL TIMES

Above: St. Ambrose Academy students Angela Quinones (left) and Jenny Marsland jump rope during a recent lunch hour at the school on Madison's far west side. Top: Student Michael Carey prays in a chapel with his classmates.

## St. Ambrose: Small school, big hopes

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Sophomore Olivia Smithmier-Bohn, who previously attended public schools, is a fresh face at St. Ambrose this fall and said "as a new student, I never felt awkward or uncomfortable. For me it is so incredibly different and wonderful to go to school within the context of my Catholic faith."

Mike Winowski said the small school setting has been a good choice for his daughter, Lucy, and said he was generally more comfortable with the religious atmosphere at St. Ambrose than what he saw in the public schools.

Winowski is the pastor at Geneva Campus Church, an evangelical Protestant church on the University of Wisconsin-Madison campus, and he said his church has more in common with the Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches today in terms of its theological, moral and ethical teachings than the more liberal of the Protestant denominations.

St. Ambrose has no affiliation with any Catholic order, but has the enthusiastic approval of Bishop Robert Morlino, who said in an e-mail that "we all want to see it grow and flourish."

The school's backers don't draw comparisons with Edgewood, Madison's 125-year-old Catholic high school that has more than 600 students. For his part, Edgewood President Judd Schimmel said he welcomes the school.

"From my perspective, anything that provides an opportunity for families to have options to educate their children and express their faith adds to the fabric of life," he said.

**Cloistered feel?** The atmosphere at St. Ambrose harkens back to Catholic schools from decades ago in some ways.

School days at the tiny academy, which is located in the religious education wing of St. Thomas Aquinas parish on Madison's west side, 602 Everglade Drive, begin and end with prayer.

The students' voices, rising and falling in the rhythms of the Morning Prayer from the Magnificat and the Chaplet of Divine Mercy in the unlit chapel, the unadorned white walls of the classrooms and the orderly, geometric rose gardens at the school's entrance, all contribute to a cloistered feel at St. Ambrose.

But the school is no monastery, parents, staff and students insist, even if its unabashed Christian evangelism has clearly been a significant part of its appeal.

On a recent Tuesday afternoon, the entire student body rehearsed a dance number for an upcoming musical performance during their weekly music and drama class.

Breathless from the exertion in their formal shoes, khaki-color trousers and collared shirts, they interacted like a very large family, looking more than anything like a casting call for "The Sound of Music," complete with sixth-grade boys with piping voices and graceful, nearly adult young women, one of whom said she



PHOTOS BY MIKE DWIRES/THE CAPITAL TIMES

Top: St. Ambrose Academy volunteer art teacher Sabrina McCloskey (left) sprays fixative on an art project created by Susannah Weakland-Warden. Left: Tara McCloskey studies in a math class taught by volunteer teacher Patrick Carey. Above: Principal John Gillett says the overarching mission of St. Ambrose is to develop Catholic saints.

aspired to be an F-16 fighter pilot.

When asked to describe how religion is woven into the fabric of the educational experience at St. Ambrose, history and religion teacher

Patrick Delaney described a discussion in a recent senior history class.

Using historical documents that included some of the original debates between Stephen Douglas and Abra-

ham Lincoln over slavery, he said students began a lively discussion about individual rights, and how a person, and his or her rights, are defined. He said the conversation quickly moved to abortion, and the rights of the unborn.

Senior students say they love Delaney's lively classes, and were particularly enthusiastic about a course he teaches that includes taking a stand on religious issues in the public arena, a subject he clearly relishes and understands. He was formerly director

**'It was a hoot!'** With just one regular extracurricular sports team at St. Ambrose — a girls' golf team — parents look beyond the resources of the school for enrichment programs.

Because many of the close-knit community of parents that helped develop St. Ambrose have home-schooled their children, they are past masters at finding activities that involve using the resources of the community.

St. Ambrose parents "are very good at using things like the Capitol Ice Arena, or the pool at the Bishop O'Connor Center to help supplement the kids' education and help them become well rounded," explained Chuck West, whose son, Christian, attended the school last year when he was in seventh grade.

He said parents themselves often contribute their own expertise or skills for after-school activities.

"This is going to sound a bit un-Christian but our son learned sharpshooting after school from one of the parents. I thought it was a hoot, and he really loved it," West said.

He added that his son flourished at St. Ambrose, and the confidence he gained followed him to a public school in Poynette this year when the family moved from Madison to their cabin at Lake Wisconsin.

Junior Tara McCloskey, one of a handful of Protestant students, said she enjoys the strong sense of community and the curriculum, even though Catholic doctrine is unfamiliar to her.

"I'm very happy here," she said. "To be honest, I'm a little uncomfortable with purgatory and praying to Mary or the saints, but I like learning from other students, and I think they like learning from me. My parents taught me to stand up for my beliefs, and people here accept that. I'd be open to conversion if somebody had a better argument. But that hasn't happened so far."

Olivia Smithmier-Bohn's father, John, has become a true believer in St. Ambrose.

He said Olivia, whom he called a remarkable student in any setting, was finding the small faith-based classes, supportive peers and engaged faculty a revelation.

"Olivia is legally blind. But she is doing more than just thriving, even though everyone was a little worried at first that St. Ambrose didn't have the technical resources to help her. You know, there's a saying about education being the lighting of a fire, not the filling of a pail? Well, Olivia's on fire."

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