

Youths rely on peer sponsors for guidance

By Barbara Ann Homick
Staff writer

When it came time for John Taylor to choose a confirmation sponsor, he knew the type of person he wanted to ask.

It wasn't the traditional sponsor his parents assumed that he would select, such as a grandparent or a family friend.

Taylor had someone else in mind. The junior at Pittsford Mendon High School chose one of his best friends, Andrew Nielsen, to be his sponsor.

Nielsen was shocked.

"I never really heard of someone my age being a sponsor so it took me by surprise," said Nielsen. "I felt honored, kind of big."

Taylor said he decided to ask the fellow parishioner of St. Louis Church because he wanted a sponsor close to his own age. He also said it was important to ask someone who knew him well.

Taylor and Nielsen have been friends since meeting in a seventh-grade science class at Pittsford Mendon. The youths have continued their friendship through high school activities and involvement in the St. Louis Parish teen group.

The 16-year-old Taylor said he is learning much about himself and the Catholic Church during his confirmation preparation. Taylor noted that as one of the older candidates in the class, he has been able to carry on serious conversations about his faith with Nielsen.

In fact, one of the main reasons Taylor selected Nielsen as his sponsor was his knowledge of the church. Taylor did not attend Catholic schools so he needed more information about his faith.

But Nielsen's understanding of church issues wasn't the only deciding factor, Taylor said. Although the confirmation candidate considered his grandfather and another friend from the teen group as sponsors, Taylor said he was impressed with Nielsen's ability to take responsibility for his actions.

For instance, Taylor recalled one time when an atheistic classmate was challenging the existence of God. Taylor recalled that he found himself chiming in with the other boy's disrespectful remarks.

After class, Nielsen approached Taylor and said, "If you are not ready to make your confirmation, then don't. I don't want to be your sponsor and welcome you into the church if you are going to say things like that."

Taylor recalled another time when a remark by Nielsen spurred a change in his life. As some friends stood around judging someone they didn't know, Nielsen spoke up and said the youths shouldn't pass



Babette G. Augustin/Staff photographer

John Taylor (right) has chosen one of his best friends, Andrew Nielsen (left), as his confirmation sponsor. Taylor said he asked the fellow parishioner of Pittsford's St. Louis Church because he wanted a sponsor close to his own age.

judgment on people so quickly.

"That changed me," remarked Taylor. "Now I try to look at things more openly and not with a closed mind."

Although he has been a friend and guide through the preparation process, Nielsen said his responsibilities as sponsor will not end after Taylor's confirmation service on May 13.

"If he needs anything at all, he can call. As his sponsor, if he needs any friendship or guidance I'll be there for him," noted the 17-year-old Nielsen.

Dan Delaney of Elmira chose his good friend for many of the same reasons as Taylor.

Delaney, who was confirmed on April 19 at St. John the Baptist Church (one of the three churches in Elmira's East Side Catholic Parishes), said he chose his friend Chris Mechalke as his sponsor because he trusted Mechalke's guidance and respected their friendship.

Mechalke said he was jolted by the request.

"I knew what it entailed and that's why I was shocked," said the Elmira Free Acad-

emy senior.

Delaney recalled that Father David N. Gramkee, pastor of the cluster, told him he should look up to his sponsor. The priest also said the candidate should be able to see Christ in the person chosen as sponsor. Delaney said Mechalke fit that bill.

The 16-year-old sophomore at Horseheads High School recalled that when he attended his first youth group meeting in Elmira, Mechalke was the first person to introduce himself.

"He was the first person to accept me into the group and I never forgot that," said Delaney.

And as far as his responsibilities go, Mechalke said he will always be around if Delaney needs him.

"It's definitely just not for the one Mass," said Mechalke about his responsibilities as sponsor. "I'm not just there for one day. I'll be there to answer questions and help him with any problems."

For Katie Sullivan, having her sponsor around for guidance will be even easier because they share the same family.

Sullivan said she asked her older sister, Colleen, to be her sponsor at her October confirmation at Church of the Assumption in Fairport because the older Sullivan went through the process two years ago.

"I can talk to her and she understands what terms everything is on," said Katie, a freshman at Minerva DeLand School.

Colleen said she was happy her sister chose her because Colleen assumed her younger sister would choose a friend of the family. Colleen added that she understands the importance of her role.

"I'm responsible for seeing that she is

confirmed," said the 17-year-old junior at Fairport High School. "My job is to make it easier and as beneficial to her as possible."

Although it is not required, Colleen has accompanied Katie on her community-service projects. The two girls also jog in the evening and go to the movies together or shopping with friends.

"We still get mad at each other," said Colleen, who shares her bedroom with Katie. But the older Sullivan added, "But we've been friends the whole way through. It's not just something that started now. We're a close family."

Jason Augustine is not part of Jenette Cohan's family, but that didn't stop the 15-year-old confirmation candidate at Assumption Parish from selecting her good friend as sponsor.

According to Cohan, the two youths met through the church folk group and Camp Stella Maris. The freshman at Minerva DeLand said she respects Augustine for his calm demeanor.

"He has a calm way of dealing with problems," she said.

Augustine, a senior at Fairport High School, said he was very surprised when Cohan asked him to be her sponsor. Because he will be going away to college in Ohio this fall, Augustine said he is disappointed that he won't be around if Cohan needs further guidance. But, he added, he will do whatever he can to be there for Cohan.

"I feel a sponsor and a candidate should work together before and after the service. You can't just walk away after (the service) and say 'have a nice life,'" he said.

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