

Grads' roads to future bypass college route

By Mike Latona
Staff writer

For most high-school graduates in New York state, moving on to college is almost a given.

But for many others, it isn't. Among this group are several diocesan Catholics who graduate from high school this month but won't be walking a college campus this fall. Their reasons range widely. Some will go directly into a trade; others are planning an internship; and still others will travel to foreign lands.

In Sarah Becker's case, she certainly had the grades to apply to colleges: She is the 1998 valedictorian at Elmira Notre Dame High School. Yet rather than attend college immediately, Sarah will travel to India in July for one year through the Rotary Youth Exchange program. She will live with three different families during that time.

"I want to enrich my life. I just love experiencing new cultures, new lifestyles," Sarah, 17, explained. "I just think now is a good time. The transition of going from high school to college, it's a big change. I'd like to take a break."

Siobhan Moffitt, also, will also travel abroad following graduation from Eastridge High School in Irondequoit. She will leave in August for the Nuestros Pequeños Hermanos (Our Little Brothers and Sisters) Orphanage in southern Mexico to perform a one-year mission project.

Siobhan found out about the missionary work through the Catholic Network of Volunteer Service. She was drawn to working on the project because, she said, "I absolutely adore the Spanish language." In addition, she noted that her eyes had been opened to the plight of poor Latin Americans when she visited Peru in the summer of 1996.

"I saw a kind of poverty I had never seen before," said Siobhan, 18, from St. Cecilia's Church in Irondequoit.

Joe Meyers, also, is using the Catholic Network of Volunteer Service to map out his short-term plans. After he graduates from Spencerport High School, Joe said he's attempting to secure a six-month internship — in the Chicago area — to perform youth ministry. He would then begin college the following autumn, he said.

By doing the internship first, he said, "I get to find out whether I like (youth ministry) or not."

"I've seen a lot of kids wasting their first year of college and wasting a lot of money; I've seen that more than once. And I could see that happening to me," remarked Joe, 18, from St. John the Evangelist Church in Spencerport.

Meanwhile, two new Nazareth Academy graduates will stick close to home as they move toward their career goals. Betsy Dreher will attend a program through Shear Ego International School of Hair Design, located in Irondequoit, beginning this fall to obtain her hairdressing license.

"Ever since I've been in second grade, I haven't thought I wanted to do anything else except people's hair. I do my friends' hair all the time," said Betsy, 18, from Our Mother of Sorrows Church in Greece.

And beginning next January, Karla Kieffer will attend a program at Canopy's, a Rochester restaurant run by SUNY Brockport & Education Opportunity Center to help train people for food industry careers. In the meantime, she will work her part-time job at a children's clothing store.

Karla said she was attracted to the profession after working for a catering service last year. She added that she enjoys cooking meals for her families.

"I like to make dinners, especially scallops with lemon sauce and pasta. And we have a garden with all the fresh herbs, so I can put them right in," said Karla, 19, from

"I feel I have a lot of opportunities that I don't have to go to college for."

— Karla Kieffer



Greg Francis/Staff photographer

Nazareth senior Betsy Dreher, who intends to work toward a hairdresser's license, curls the hair of friend Stefanie Aiello May 27 at Betsy's Greece home.



Karla Kieffer, a graduating Nazareth senior who plans to pursue a career in the food industry, cooks in her parents' kitchen.

Sacred Heart Cathedral.

Betsy and Karla said this vocational training made them feel they didn't need college at this time.

"I don't consider this to be college, but I consider it to be future education," Betsy said.

"I feel I have a lot of opportunities that I don't have to go to college for," Karla said.

And yet, Sarah and Siobhan said, a common mind-set is that college naturally follows right after high school.

"It kind of shocks them a bit when you say you're not going," Sarah said.

"The automatic question is, 'Where are you going to college?'" Siobhan agreed.

In fact, Siobhan said, she even catches herself assuming that her fellow high-school graduates are heading for college.

"I try to tell myself not to. I have to say, 'So, what are you doing after high school?' instead of 'Where are you going to college?'" Siobhan remarked.

Joe and Siobhan said that this expectation should not push graduates toward college before they're ready, or if they wish to

explore an alternative future.

"I think a lot of them feel society says they should (go right to college)," Joe said.

"There's this time line, and everybody thinks that's what they're supposed to be following," Siobhan said.

Yet Siobhan also said that people get excited when they learn what her plans are.

"It's not like I'm going to sit here and veg," Siobhan said. "I'm not going to school, but I know what I want to do." She added that her ultimate dream is to begin college in the year 2000, get her teaching degree and open up her own missionary school — "with God's help."

Sarah and Karla suggested that high-school students focus on their own aspirations, rather than go by others' expectations.

"I think everyone should do what's right for them," Sarah said.

If you're not sure about college, Karla said, "Wait and see if you really want to go. You shouldn't go because that's what everybody else is doing. You should do what you want to do."

Stat Pak

How many people go straight from high school to college? Most, according to the New York State Department of Education.

A 1995-96 report stated that 79.9 percent of the state's public high-school graduates — apparently planned to attend a two- or four-year college immediately after graduation. For non-public high school graduates — including Catholic high schools — the number was slightly higher, 84.8 percent.

A wider gap between public and non-public high school graduates was found in those who planned to attend four-year colleges: 52.4 percent for public, and 74.1 for non-public.

Pat O'Brien, a program research assistant with the education department, said that the numbers are based on intent. Although plans may change, he estimated that well over 90 percent of the graduates stick to plans made at graduation time.

In a sampling of Catholic high schools from the Rochester Diocese, percentages of college-bound students appear higher than the state averages.

At McQuaid Jesuit High School, spokesperson Joanne Balher said that all 152 members of the Class of 1998 plan to attend college in the fall. And at Geneva DeSales High School, principal Ed Tracy said that all 21 graduates also intend to be on a campus come autumn.

And of Nazareth Academy's 56 graduates in 1998, 53 plan to attend college in the fall, according to Joe Biondolillo, the school's guidance director.

Despite these numbers, Biondolillo had supportive words for those who choose to bypass college. He said that career and technical schools, apprenticeships, the military, and full-time employment are also available options for those considering alternatives to college.

"Some of the most successful young people are people who do not go into a traditional two- or four-year institution," Biondolillo said.

Biondolillo maintained that many students feel pressured to go to college even when they're not ready. This is especially true, he noted, at private institutions where a high financial commitment has been made in tuition costs toward a student's education.

"This is the '90s, and you hear nothing but, 'How can we get our students a college education?'" I think that's a very good question.