

MOV On the



From left, Emily Faccl, Lisa Engstrom and Amy Elliott sing school alma mater prior to Our Lady of Mercy High School commencement

Photo by Greg Francis/Staff Photographer

Single sex, fewer distractions

Story by Mike Lafona

You often hear about women's liberation, women of the '90s, and so on. But in adolescence, Kate Rickard said, girls still hesitate to assert themselves when boys are around.

In fact, if Kate had attended a coeducational high school, she doubts that she would have run for class office.

"I probably would have sat back because boys are always running for leadership positions. They're intimidating," said Kate, 18, a parishioner at St. Louis Church in Pittsford.

Sarah Eksten recalls that she refrained from speaking up when she attended a coed elementary school.

"If you have an answer and you don't know whether it's right or wrong, you feel intimidated. You think a guy will make fun of you if you give a wrong answer," said Sarah, 17, from St. James Church in Irondequoit.

Kate and Sarah graduated in June from all-girls high schools — Kate from Our Lady of Mercy, and Sarah from Nazareth Academy. Both said that single-sex institutes helped arm them with confidence as they prepare to head off to college.

"I've gained more leadership skills. Now I can step up and do what I have to do," said Kate, who was a student council co-chair at Mercy this past year.

"Now I can express myself more, whether it's a guy or a girl I'm talking to," Sarah said.

Of the seven Catholic high schools in the Rochester Diocese, three offer single-sex enrollment: Mercy and Nazareth along with McQuaid Jesuit, the only all-boys school. Aquinas Institute was also all-boys until it became coed in the early 1980s.

Olena Lylak, director at Nazareth Academy, said that single-sex education at her school "has everything to do with self-development."

"Girls are more self-conscious when boys are watching, particularly during adolescence," Lylak said. "Your body is changing, all kinds of things are happening."

All-girls schools offer numerous other advantages, said Becky Plonsky, director of communications at Mercy.

"Girls (at such schools) score higher on standardized tests, develop higher levels of self-esteem and do more volunteering and giving of themselves," Plonsky said. "They are more likely to assume leadership roles not only in the school, but also in the larger community."

Student leaders at all-girl schools, Lylak observed, also help draw less outgoing students out of their shells.

"Even the followers are getting role-modeling," Lylak said.

Jeff Lambert, who is beginning his senior year at McQuaid Jesuit, said the absence of girls at his school eliminates a major distraction.

"You're more centered on education, rather than attention to a single person. In the hallway it might be

more like, 'How was that test today?' or 'That teacher is really tough,'" said Jeff 17, from St. John the Evangelist Church in Spencerport.

Sarah said that girls at Nazareth Academy didn't spend school hours "trying to impress the guys. They can be who they really are."

Father Leon Hogenkamp, SJ, added that boys, also, tend to remove their masks in a single-sex setting.

"There's a certain freedom that boys have in boys' schools, as do girls in girls' schools," said Father Hogenkamp, vice-president at McQuaid Jesuit.

Gerald McGuire, assistant principal at Aquinas Institute, said he noticed a marked change when girls began attending Aquinas.

"It was some of the emotional things you didn't use to see — like a boy and a girl breaking up," said McGuire, an AQ teacher and administrator since 1986. "There were certainly a number of distractions when it was just boys, and then you had even more distractions. I started to see boys just staring off in class."

Jeff said that attending McQuaid raises "the question of no girls, no girl friends." Yet he pointed out that there's plenty of interaction with Mercy High School through jointly produced plays and such social functions as dances.

"Just because they're not in the same building doesn't mean you can't have the same type of relationship," Jeff said.

Nazareth opened in 1871; Mercy in 1928 and McQuaid in 1954. Though the single-sex tradition has been upheld, Plonsky noted that Mercy's modern curriculum includes law and sciences, whereas its original focus leaned more toward religious life, nursing and teaching. And Nazareth Academy offers a pre-engineering program, preparing girls for "a field that's typically male-dominated," Lylak said.

Father Hogenkamp said that McQuaid is also adjusting to modern times, encouraging boys to become men with a sensitive side.

"They can be themselves — be boisterous, be active, be energetic. But society also wants them to be caring, sensitive, loving and gentle, and we can allow them to be both," he said.

One challenge for single-sex schools is having to cross off 50 percent of the population before recruiting even begins. In fact, McGuire said that long-term vitality was a chief reason for Aquinas opting to go coed. The first female students at Aquinas came over from St. Agnes, an all-girls school that closed in 1982.

McGuire said that many Aquinas alumni opposed the change at first, but the situation has eased as time has passed.

"We still have a strong Aquinas tradition. But now there's two traditions," McGuire said.

COMING NEXT WEEK:
Teen shrine trip



Mike Mergen/Photo Intern

Clockwise from bottom, Matt Ragusa, Jeffrey Schlaerth, Peter Marche, Anuj Chawla, and Christian Schlaerth celebrate graduation from McQuaid Jesuit High School, June 13 at Rochester's Eastman Theatre.