

On the MOVE

A tradition of racial diversity



(From left) Danielle James, 16, Jamella James, 18, Keri Close, 17, and Meghan Dahlman, 17, rehearse to Michael Jackson's "Thriller" at Nazareth Academy in Rochester Jan. 16. They will perform the dance for a multicultural celebration Feb. 6.

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Being non-Catholic in a Catholic high school was one of many adjustments Janna Sterling faced when she began attending Nazareth Academy this past fall.

"I'm not used to calling anyone 'Sister,' said Janna, 15, referring to the Sisters of St. Joseph who staff the all-girls' school.

Janna had attended public school in New Orleans, La., up until last year. After learning that Nazareth Academy mostly has white students, Janna — who is black — recalled that she "didn't want to be the one to stand out."

As far as Catholic high schools go, Janna came to the right place. According to the school, 23 percent of Nazareth Academy's nearly 275 students are black — the largest percentage among the seven Catholic high schools in the Diocese of Rochester.

Sister Ann Collins, executive director of the Nazareth Schools, said African-American students have long been a part of the Nazareth tradition. In earlier generations, she added, the high school was a haven for minorities such as Irish and Italian immigrants.

"I think it's always been the mission of Nazareth and the Sisters of St. Joseph to be diverse," Sister Collins said. She added that although few of Nazareth's black students are Catholic, they're all Christians who tend to be devoted to their faith.

These ideals would likely have set well with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., whose national holiday was observed Jan. 21. In his 1963 "I Have a Dream" speech, King stressed his desire to see "that day when all of God's children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands."

Even so, white students at Nazareth Academy outnumber black students 3-to-1 — which, according to some of the black students, can create some discomfort. For example, they said they sometimes feel they're stereotyped by white students as well as faculty members.

To help sort through these issues, the school

offers a Cultural Awareness Club. Father Michael Upson, administrator of Rochester's Immaculate Conception Parish, coordinates the 39-member group and meets with it nearly every week. The priest's stated goal is to equip students with "a greater awareness of how misunderstandings can occur in cross-cultural communication, and strategies to avoid them."

"He tells us to think before we react," Janna said. "You can't just flip out," added Candice Dade, 14.

"He says to deal with (a conflict), to try to look at it from another point of view," said Charis Quick, 14.

Ashanti Tolbert, 15, added that this means not jumping to conclusions "just because it's the opposite race."

LaToya Johnson, 15, said that she sometimes feels judged because she uses such words as "ain't" and "wazzup." On the other hand, she remarked, "Some (white) people do try to understand it. I grew up on the street, so that's how I talk."

Mary Moore, 14, said she's always gone to Catholic schools and has many friends, black and white. But she's also thankful for Father Upson because he is black. "You feel like you can tell him your problems," she said.

The students interviewed say Father Upson's presence is vital because there are no adult faculty or administrators who are black. According to Sister Collins, this is an ongoing



Nikki Lockhart, 16, and Stephanie Bowens, 16, dance to 'N Sync's "Pop."

issue that the school is trying to resolve. "Black teachers of quality are in demand, and unfortunately our pay scale does not put us in competition with public schools," she said.

Olena Lylak, Nazareth Academy's principal, said the student body becomes integrated through fine-arts programs and cultural assemblies, where students can "understand each other better," she said. Nevertheless, Lylak said that a certain level of separation, such as blacks grouping together in the lunchroom and classrooms, should be expected.

"It exists in the workplace, too," Lylak said.