

Valedictorians share friendship, faith

Mike Latona/Catholic Courier

This past June, Stephanie Then and Maggie McLaughlin each delivered valedictorian speeches to hundreds of fellow high-school graduates and guests.

Yet it was several years ago, in a smaller setting — Corning's All Saints Academy — where these long-time friends say they began building toward their immense high-school successes.

"At All Saints they push you into doing things, getting your homework done," Stephanie said.

"I learned study skills, which is one of the biggest problems kids face in high school," Maggie added.

The overall atmosphere at All Saints was a big plus as well, Stephanie added: "The greatest thing is that classes are small and so you get to know the teachers and your class — you get a comfort level. It's that extra support you need so you can succeed in life."

"I think it was very important socially," Maggie agreed. "You learn how to make close friends at All Saints. I was incredibly shy, but I knew everyone."

Stephanie and Maggie's close friendship began when they met in second grade at All Saints. From seventh to 10th grades Stephanie and her family lived in Germany, where she attended an international school. Upon returning to Steuben County, she began attending Corning East while Maggie was already off to Corning West. The bonds have remained strong while each young woman has climbed to the top of her public high-school class.

"It's the kind of friendship where you can be away for awhile and get right back where you started," Stephanie said.

Stephanie and Maggie, along with another close friend from their All Saints days, Theresa Schimizzi, have kept in close contact through the All Saints Parish youth group, taking part in weekly meetings as well as service projects and fall retreats. Another active youth-group member is Ashley O'Driscoll, who was salutatorian at Corning West.

Stephanie also noted that Theresa graduated as a high-honor student at Corning East. And just for good measure, the Corning East salutatorian, Amanda Freeze, is yet another member of All Saints Parish, although she's not active in youth group.

"It's very unusual. They were the brightest group of kids I ever worked with," Marie McCaig, All Saints' youth minister, said of her high-achieving senior members. She



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Stephanie Then (left) and Maggie McLaughlin play a clapping game July 20 during an All Saints, Corning, youth-group picnic in Painted Post. The two friends were valedictorians of their respective classes at Corning East and Corning West high schools this past June.

Youth

joked that "I can't take credit for it, they came to me that way."

Maggie topped a class of 230 students at Corning West and Stephanie was valedictorian for 169 graduates at Corning East. Both attended each other's graduations, and they speak glowingly of the other's accomplishments. However, the 18-year-olds are uncomfortable taking individual credit.

"I did what I needed to do and it just kind of happened to me," said Stephanie, who will attend the University of Pittsburgh this fall in the hopes of entering pre-med.

"I never really set the goal. I just always felt I should try my hardest," said Maggie, who will attend Rochester's Nazareth College and pursue an education degree.

Both valedictorians successfully balanced their studies with high involvement in athletics and youth group. "The more bonds you share with people the more successful you can be. Do things together as a group — it makes things so much easier in your life," Stephanie advised.

Stephanie and Maggie recently returned from a youth-group excursion to Ohio where they attended the

summer conference at the Franciscan University of Steubenville. Stephanie said her Catholic upbringing has helped her in "being able to say yes, I know what I believe in. I set my morals when I was young, and kept them all through high school."

Maggie added that continuing youth-group activities "has been such a help for me to — although it sounds kind of clichéd — resist some of the peer pressure."

She said her religious devotion "may have seemed incredibly strange to a lot of kids. But I don't understand how kids can go through life without faith."



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Stephanie and Maggie share a laugh in front of a bonfire during the picnic.