

Project Brings School Kids a Bit Closer to Sainthood

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If you were to describe the entire sixth grade of any middle school as a bunch of saints, you'd probably raise more than a few eyebrows.

But Friday at Eugene's O'Hara Catholic School, it was true. At least for a couple of hours.

All 49 students in the school's two sixth-grade classes spent the past three months studying the saint of their choice, from St. Sebastian to St. Martin of Tours to St. Catherine of Alexandria, as part of O'Hara's 10th annual "Living Saints" presentation. Hundreds of students, teachers and parents from as far away as Salem visited the school's gymnasium on Friday to see the sixth-graders in full costume and character.

And this year, they saw an award-winning presentation. O'Hara is one of only 12 Catholic schools nationwide, and the only one in the Northwest, to receive the 2008 Catholic Schools for Tomorrow Award for Innovations in Education in the category of Total Community Involvement from "Today's Catholic Teacher" magazine.

Sixth-grade teacher Maryanne Obersinner submitted the winning entry that the magazine recognized for involving "many members of the community, from students and parents, to local religious leaders, to art scholars and the public library." Letters went out to local priests, nuns and religious communities requesting "prayerful support." The Pope himself even got a letter. An arts scholar — funded by a grant awarded to the school by the University of Oregon's Arts-Bridge Program several years running — works with students on their projects.

"The saints give us real-life examples of walking the path of Christ," Obersinner said. "The saints had all of the same kinds of challenges that we face today: difficulties getting along with our siblings, trying to figure out what sort of job we're supposed to do when we grow up. And these people give us good examples of challenges we will face throughout our lives."

Students wrote essays about their saints and painted portraits that were displayed at the Eugene Public Library this spring.

"I've learned a lot about my saint and how people admired him, and I learned a lot about the Roman Empire," said sixth-grader Ethan Smith, dressed as St. Sebastian — a soldier in the Roman Army during the third century — and sitting near a handwritten sign that read, "He chose to be a soldier of Christ."

“When I was a kid, my parents were pagans,” said Ben Graf, playing the role of and appropriately dressed as St. Martin of Tours, who lived during the fourth century and was also a Roman soldier. “They believed in different gods for the sun, earth and water.”

Allison Cutsforth portrayed St. Benedicta Cambiagio Frassinello, and she, too, spoke in character: “I was born in Pavia, Italy,” she said, dressed as the nun. “After I was diagnosed with cancer, through prayer, I went and worked with women and children in an orphanage who were sick. And I died on March 21, 1858.”

Christianity generally recognizes a saint as a holy person who has lived a divine life. The Roman Catholic Church declares saints through the formal process of canonization which can take years, even centuries.

Obersinner said there are “countless” saints, and the term simply means a person who has died and gone to heaven. In addition to formally recognized saints in the Catholic Church’s canons, “there are those who are unnamed and simply haven’t gone through the process,” she said.

And this project gave the students a connection to the saints.

“These children are just going into adolescence and then adulthood,” Obersinner said of the 49 sixth-graders at O’Hara, “and they will have these heroes that they can look back upon and reflect upon and perhaps receive some inspiration from.”