

# El Dorado students following Promise to college of choice

written by Special to Arkansas Catholic |



EL DORADO — Three Catholic teenagers from Holy Redeemer Parish are grateful to be among the first beneficiaries of a \$50-million endowment from an El Dorado-based, Fortune 500 company to help offset college expenses this year.

In fact, some say the establishment of the El Dorado Promise by Murphy Oil Corp. — which provides tuition assistance to every graduate of El Dorado High School, regardless of grade point average or ability to pay — is the biggest thing to hit South Arkansas since the discovery of oil in the 1920s.

Claiborne Deming, president and chief executive officer of Murphy Oil, guided more than 200 seniors through the school's first academic signing day last May. Three of them attend Holy Redeemer Church in El Dorado.

Father Gregory Pilcher, OSB, pastor, hopes El Dorado Promise will show Catholics in the state that, even though Holy Redeemer closed its school in 2005, there are still reasons to live in the city.

"With the loss of Catholic schools continuing, the El Dorado Promise presents a unique opportunity for families in our diocese where no Catholic education is available .... This program will ensure the opportunity for a college education for their children, and they will still have a vibrant Catholic community for their family in Holy Redeemer Church."

Among those signing academic letters of intent were Will Wilson, 17, Joel Gonzalez, 18, and Melissa Eckart, 18, all active parishioners and making the transition to collegiate life this fall. Gonzalez, whose family immigrated to Arkansas when he was a toddler, said he always intended to pursue a higher education if he could find a way to finance it.

One route was the Army Reserves; in fact, Gonzalez had stuffed Army recruiter paperwork into his backpack just before the announcement came about the El Dorado Promise in January. His thoughts went from reluctant resignation to jubilation on the day of the announcement:

"As soon as they said that tuition money would be provided, I was like, 'Oh my gosh, that's my way to college,'" he said, adding with a grin, "The paperwork from the Reserves went into the trash."

Gonzalez, the first generation to attend a four-year school, said his parents, Nicolas and Francisca, weren't thrilled with the idea of him joining the military during a time of war just to pay for school.

"But I couldn't think of any other way to afford it," Gonzalez said.

As a student at Henderson State University in Arkadelphia, he got a further boost — Henderson officials announced this year they will match dollar for dollar any scholarship money received from the El Dorado Promise.

"As long as I maintain my grade point average, my education is covered," said Gonzalez, smiling.

Eckart, who graduated third in her class of 260, is enjoying the fruits of her efforts as a freshman at St. Louis University in Missouri.

Although her parents, John and Laurie Eckart, concede they would've worked it out so their daughter could attend the prestigious Jesuit university, scholarship money from the El Dorado Promise has eased their financial burden considerably — especially since they are already assisting Melissa's older brother, Stephen, a junior attending the University of Notre Dame this fall.

"There was a time when we might've only been able to help pay for an undergraduate degree. Now we can consider helping with graduate studies," said Laurie Eckart, the day before a long drive to Missouri and Indiana to get her two oldest children settled.

Those sentiments were echoed by Ann and Larkin Wilson, proud parents of Will, who recently started at the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville.

"It's like we won the lottery," said Ann Wilson. "It was such an unexpected bonus, so yes, we're grateful since every little bit counts."

The Wilsons have an older son enrolled in school at Washington and Lee University in Lexington, Va., and a younger daughter, Kat, who will likely pursue a college degree upon graduation from El Dorado High.

The scholarship has made national headlines and garnered praise from educators and economic developers alike.

To receive the scholarship, a student must enroll within the El Dorado School District by the ninth grade and graduate from the high school.

The annual scholarship is limited to the highest yearly rate charged by an Arkansas public university, currently \$6,010, but Murphy Oil Corp. has factored inflation into the program, which will last 20 years.

Scholarship money pays 100 percent of the max if a student has attended school in El Dorado since kindergarten and is pro-rated downward from there. To remain eligible for the scholarship, the program requires students to enroll at an accredited two- or four-year college or university, maintain a 2.0 grade point average and complete a minimum of 12 credit hours per semester.