

Sophia Vacca: 15 Catholic young adults who inspire us

written by Arkansas Catholic Staff |

MENA

Sophia Vacca was an active leader in the diocese's Youth Advisory Council and Search retreats. She was also very involved in youth events at her parish, St. Agnes Church in Mena.

"My parents are the youth leaders," the 18-year-old said. "My mom does junior high, and my dad does senior high. So I've been involved with my parents throughout the years helping with our Vacation Bible School and helping with different events that the church puts on. If something happens, I'm usually there with my family. It's created such amazing memories and good learning experiences as well."

Vacca has helped lead VBS for years and is passionate about helping children at her parish form their faith early.

"Ever since I was in sixth grade when I got out of the age of attending, I've been a helper," Vacca said. "And I plan to work with kids when I grow up, so this has always been something that I love to do. And I usually try to just help out with either interacting directly with the kids or help put on some of the skits. This year, I'm doing the photography aspect of it."

This fall, Vacca is attending the University of Dallas, planning to study psychology. She wants to become a child therapist or social worker.

"I just know I would like to work with kids," Vacca said. "I have always loved being around kids. ... There are so many kids around Arkansas that need help, so that is something I've always wanted to do. Being involved with Vacation Bible School and different camps with the sports that I do has really led me to see that there are issues that need to be addressed within the community of children here."

If you could go on any pilgrimage, where would you go?

"I think Lourdes would be amazing. I think it's such a beautiful story... I've heard so many stories about people going there, and I've watched a movie about it, and it was very inspiring. I've always wanted to do something like that."

More stories will appear in our 15 Young Adults Who Inspire Us 2024 Section as they are posted online.

Rebekah Spellins: 15 Catholic young adults who inspire us

written by Arkansas Catholic Staff |



LITTLE ROCK

When Rebekah Spellins enrolled at Benedictine College in Kansas, she intended to stay near Kansas City.

"I like to say that the Holy Spirit punted me back down to Little Rock," Spellins said with a laugh. After struggling to find a school with teacher openings in Kansas City, she called Kathy House, principal of Christ the King School, to ask for advice. Shortly after, former pastor, now-Bishop Francis I. Malone called her in for an interview.

"It felt too easy, almost," Spellins said. "But I prayed a lot about it, and the Lord knew this is where I was supposed to be."

Spellins, 28, daughter of Deacon Randy and Kim Spellins, has been a second-grade teacher for the past seven years.

While many individuals credit their teachers with shaping them into the person they are supposed to be, Spellins credits her students and co-teachers with shaping her into a better teacher and person.

"Teaching is a very difficult job, and the students at Christ the King and the faculty and staff have been a huge blessing to me," Spellins said. "I really could not be who I am without them."

Spellins also credits her parents, who emphasized the role of faith in the day-to-day life of the home, with growing and molding her faith.

Determined to be a better teacher and servant of Christ, Spellins completed a master's degree in literacy in May.

"I could tell I wasn't being as effective as I could be, so I decided to do literacy with a dyslexia endorsement," she said.

What national or global issue are you most passionate about?

"It's got to be education. When I start talking about it, I feel like I'm running for office. Education is my central issue, and I have a lot of strong opinions about the way that we don't invest in education in this country... Education as a whole is so interesting because I feel like if you talk to anybody on the street, they say education is so important, but we continue to refuse to invest in educational infrastructure."

More stories will appear in our 15 Young Adults Who Inspire Us 2024 Section as they are posted online.

Mary-Alice Gabe: 15 Catholic young adults who inspire us

written by Arkansas Catholic Staff |

JONESBORO

Mary-Alice Gabe was pondering her career choices after she graduated from the University of Mississippi in 2023 with degrees in integrated marketing and communications.

She instead chose to return to her hometown of Jonesboro to pursue a master's degree at Arkansas State University. But God had other plans.

The 23-year-old member of Blessed Sacrament Church kept hearing about the opening for a campus minister at St. John Newman University Parish, also in Jonesboro. Gabe decided to apply for the position

"It was inspiring to see how much they wanted this ministry to grow because that's always been something important to me," Gabe said. "At my university, my campus ministry was lacking until the last year. ... The ministries that I've been a part of, I want them to become something more, so this was the perfect opportunity to get in there and make it more."

She began her new job July 1.

"It's been great so far," she said. "The kids are the best part of this. They are so enthusiastic to get someone in there like myself who wants to help them and wants to help them grow."

Gabe hopes that in her position she is able to grow the ministry on the ASU campus.

“We’re here and we’re a community, and we want you to join,” Gabe said. “ ... That’s the biggest thing — getting our name out there. We are here, and we would love for you to join us.”

What national or global issue are you most passionate about?

“The pro-life movement. I was so involved with it in my younger years, and it’s just something that keeps coming up as a recurring topic in the media and society. It’s one of those where you’ve got to keep strong to what you believe, because people are going to try to bulldoze that right out of you.”

More stories will appear in our 15 Young Adults Who Inspire Us 2024 Section as they are posted online.

Oscar Burney: 15 Catholic young adults who inspire us

written by Arkansas Catholic Staff |



WINSLOW

Although just turning the page on his 18th birthday, Oscar Burney is already discerning the next step in his life journey.

Currently a senior at Ozark Catholic Academy in Tontitown, Burney is looking to enter the House of Formation in Little Rock next fall as a seminarian, a decision he has been considering since before high school.

He has served as an altar server for almost seven years at his parish, Our Lady of the Ozarks Shrine in Winslow, and currently helps the parish train new servers.

“In hopes that they will learn to serve reverently,” Burney said, “and likewise bring up new altar servers in the future.”

If students were asked at Ozark Catholic Academy, Burney would stand out as a person who lives out his faith every day. That is why he serves in the position of spiritual director for men at the school and has been the cross country and track teams chaplain for three years.

Burney said he feels humbled to serve in these positions but also says he thinks the most misunderstood role of everyone’s life is to be the light of Christ by serving and loving our neighbor.

“Most people, including myself, seem to think that they have to do something big like the saints to be considered great, but there are so many more small things that are left undone that together make up the biggest thing,” he said. “It is my hope that I will be able to help people understand this truth this year before I leave high school and head off to the world.”

Coffee, tea or soda?

“Soda, but chocolate milk is the absolute best.”

More stories will appear in our 15 Young Adults Who Inspire Us 2024 Section as they are posted online.

John Tobin: 15 Catholic young adults who inspire us

written by Arkansas Catholic Staff |

NORTH LITTLE ROCK

John Tobin, 18, has worked in the afterschool care program at Our Lady of the Holy Souls School in Little Rock for the past two years, plus the summer care program.

A parishioner at Immaculate Conception Church in North Little Rock and recent graduate of

Catholic High School in Little Rock, Tobin spent his high school years involved in Search and the Youth Advisory Council for the Diocese of Little Rock.

“I really enjoyed being on YAC, and it really helped me grow in my faith and make some friends,” Tobin said. “My roommate for college was actually on YAC too.”

Tobin’s involvement with four Search retreats and YAC not only deepened his faith but made him more patient and kind — good traits to have when working with summer care and afterschool care students.

“I work with kids going into first grade. They’re a pretty rowdy bunch,” Tobin said with a laugh. “It’s fun. There’s never a dull moment.”

By working with youth, Tobin discovered his love for teaching. He enrolled in the University of Central Arkansas this fall, double majoring in English and education, with a possible minor in history.

“I’d like to teach in a high school, preferably Catholic High,” Tobin said. “But otherwise, I’d be perfectly happy teaching elementary and middle schoolers.”

As Tobin prepared for college, he said it’s important to surround yourself with good friends to grow in your faith.

“I was blessed to have friends that really pushed me in my faith,” Tobin said. “Learn to love your faith.”

What national or global issue are you most passionate about?

“I realized it at C2SI when I really had my eyes opened to the immigration and refugee issues. One of the speakers, Abdullah ... hearing him talk really opened my eyes to what’s going on in the world with refugees and people immigrating into the country, even legally, and how much of a struggle that is for them to get into the U.S.”

Jacob Hess: 15 Catholic young adults who inspire us

written by Arkansas Catholic Staff |

WYNNE

By day, Jacob Hess is a single, 30-year-old property and casualty insurance agent. On the weekends and evenings, he is involved in both his church and community.

At St. Peter Church in Wynne, he is an usher, Eucharistic minister and lector, sometimes serving in all three roles at the same Mass. He trains and schedules the altar servers, teaches confirmation and faith formation classes and helps his cousin, Lana Ampueda, with the

Wednesday night high school program.

He is a part-time volunteer firefighter in the Wynne Fire Department and an active member and past president of his local Rotary Club. He is on the board of the Cross County Chamber of Commerce.

Hess grew up in a mixed-faith home. His father was Pentecostal, and his mother was Catholic, and his five half-siblings are now members of different denominations. He attended local public schools and was not involved with campus ministry at Arkansas State University. It wasn't until after he graduated that he began to take his faith seriously.

He credits his grandfather David Hess with nurturing his active faith.

"When I was growing up, my grandpa got me into church. I was always with him, and it was kind of a rule that 'if you're with me, you're going to church.' I was an altar server, but my faith didn't become strong until I became an adult, more grounded and disciplined," he said.

He remains close to his grandfather, his role model and inspiration.

If you could watch the live taping of any show (past or present) what would it be and why?

"I'm very much a fan of older TV shows and sitcoms, always liked 'The Carol Burnett Show,' and love to see the actors try to stay in character during the skits without laughing."

More stories will appear in our 15 Young Adults Who Inspire Us 2024 Section as they are posted online.

Madison Hall: 15 Catholic young adults who inspire us

written by Arkansas Catholic Staff |

JACKSONVILLE

At 22 years old, Madison Hall has become very involved at St. Jude the Apostle Church in Jacksonville. She is a youth leader for the church's CYM group, a Sunday school teacher, an usher and Eucharistic minister and is currently starting a young adults group.

Becoming so involved with her church "at this young of an age has helped (her) drastically," she said.

During her freshman year of college, she admits it was hard to be motivated to go to Mass during the pandemic. Hall decided to move back home to Cabot after a rough year at Arkansas Tech University.

When her youth director's husband heard that she was moving back, he asked her to be the confirmation teacher in 2021.

"It's what brought me back because I was going through such a hard time," she said. "...Just that one question 'Would you be willing to do this?' is what brought me back and really changed my life for the better. ...It's so easy to fall into temptation when you're not going to church."

Hall has a lot of experience working with kids. She grew up babysitting, was a youth counselor at a summer camp and is currently a caregiver. She said getting to "watch them grow in their faith was amazing for (her) to see."

At the same time, she said she wants to get more involved with people her age. Hall is in the works of setting up a group for young adults at St. Jude's. Having a group of people in their 20s will make it easier to talk about things that they are going through and what they might have in common.

"I have a lot of people that stand behind me and good people to lean on," she said. "And I feel like such an important factor in your faith is having a strong foundation of people that you can go to."

If you could meet Pope Francis, what would you ask him?

"I would probably ask him what keeps him going in his faith. Because when you're over so many people and have so many critics coming after you, people who talk bad about you who don't know you, I want to know what keeps him strong. Because I'm sure he has people to lean on, but at the same time he's in a huge role that personally I would not want to be in. A lot of people tell you to keep strong in your faith and things like that, but they don't tell you how. And maybe that's not a thing that someone can tell you how to do, but they can encourage you."

More stories will appear in our 15 Young Adults Who Inspire Us 2024 Section as they are posted online.

Hilda Gonzales: 15 Catholic young adults who inspire us

written by Arkansas Catholic Staff |

CONWAY

Hilda Gonzales has gone to St. Joseph Church in Conway her whole life. She has always been involved in the church, becoming an altar server after her first Communion. At 20 years old, she is now the coordinator for altar servers in the Hispanic community and serves on the Liturgy and Worship Committee.

Being a catechist for three years and having a passion for helping the Hispanic community, Gonzales was asked if she was interested in the position. She said she “automatically said yes” and loves working with the altar servers.

“Because the kids are very young and they know that I’m young too, I feel like we’re able to have that relationship,” she said.

Her favorite part is “being able to connect with them and knowing that I’m someone that they can come up to, knowing that I’m helping form the future of the Church.”

Gonzales said she wants people to be open to helping anyone in need, especially in the Hispanic community. The Hispanic ministry is large at St. Joseph, with many bilingual people. She said she wants everyone to know that she is here for them.

Currently a student at the University of Arkansas Pulaski Technical College studying surgical technology, Gonzales puts faith and God at the center of her life.

“I try to make it a priority. To make decisions based on my faith, based on what is morally correct,” she said. “... At the end of the day, God sees my heart. I want my principles to be my first priority.”

Coffee, tea, or soda?

“Coffee all the way. I have like three cups of coffee throughout the day.”

More stories will appear in our 15 Young Adults Who Inspire Us 2024 Section as they are posted online.

Fatima Bonilla: 15 Catholic young adults who inspire us

written by Arkansas Catholic Staff |

FORT SMITH

After Fatima Bonilla finishes her day teaching fourth graders in the Fort Smith School District, her day of teaching isn’t over.

After graduating from UA Fort Smith, she chose to teach in public schools in low-income areas to show poor children God’s love and compassion and to see the lightbulb moments when students see new possibilities for their lives.

“When I grew up I didn’t have any teachers who looked like me, and I know it makes a difference,” she said.

The lifelong member of Immaculate Conception Parish is the second-oldest of five children.

When she was 9, her parents divorced, and for several years she attended church on her own.

“When things were falling apart,” she said, “I held on to God.”

Her parents have returned to Church, and her father is remarried, giving her four more half- and step-siblings. “The biggest gift God has given me is the grace to forgive,” she said.

At Immaculate Conception Church, Bonilla is the altar server coordinator for the 2 p.m. Spanish Mass and an RCIA instructor for children who are entering the Church or who began PRE classes at a later age. She helps Surrenah Werley, director of religious education, by teaching occasional confirmation classes and helping with the confirmation retreat.

If you could go on any pilgrimage, where would you go?

“When I was confirmed, I chose Our Lady of Fatima, my namesake, as my patron. I often pray the rosary at the adoration chapel and would love to visit the site of her apparitions to the children in Portugal.”

More stories will appear in our 15 Young Adults Who Inspire Us 2024 Section as they are posted online.

Emily Blake: 15 Catholic young adults who inspire us

written by Arkansas Catholic Staff |

WYNNE

As soon as she started confirmation classes, Emily Blake, an 18-year-old parishioner from St. Peter Church in Wynne, had the opportunity to do what she always wanted: be a teacher.

Blake grew up Catholic, going every week to the Sunday school program where she now teaches.

“I was always with the younger kids, and I was helping them and teaching them. It’s kind of what led me to what I’m doing now,” she said.

Blake plans to go to cosmetology school this fall to become a nail tech. She graduated from Wynne High School in May, a significant milestone after much of the school was destroyed by a tornado in 2023. The students were split between grades and alternated days attending school at a local college and one school building that survived.

Despite these hardships, Blake enjoyed her time at school and the friends that she made.

“My friend group, we actually come from a lot of different religions,” she said. “I’m actually the only Catholic in that friend group. But we all accept each other for who we are and what we

believe in, and we actually find very common beliefs between the group of us. But we all get along famously, and we don't judge each other based on what we believe in or what religion we've grown up with."

One of Blake's biggest inspirations is her relationship with her mother who is a kindergarten teacher. Her desire to be a teacher like her mother "really led (her) to being a teacher in Sunday school," she said.

Working with younger kids in faith formation and first Communion classes, she said her favorite part of teaching is the relationship she has with her students. Seeing that the students "really love being in a class and they love the energy they bring into the room" encourages Blake to "try to make a little family," she said.

If you could watch the live taping of any show (past or present), what would it be and why?

"I'm a big Lucille Ball fan, so probably 'I Love Lucy.' It's an old one, but it's a classic."

More stories will appear in our 15 Young Adults Who Inspire Us 2024 Section as they are posted online.