



Called to be leaders

COVER STORY

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Whether she is competing on the soccer field, practicing a dance routine, or performing in a play, Delia Bonner says she always tries to make sure that her faith shines through.



faith has always been an important part of her family's life.

"We did altar serving, and we did readings when they wanted kids to do them, and then, we helped out with collecting, anything that the church asked us to do. I was involved with the choir for a while. Just by having us surrounded by it, not forcing it on us or drilling it into us but letting us come to it on our own, we realized how true the faith is."

She says, from an early age, her parents set an example for her and her siblings, both through their involvement in the Church and the way they live their lives, always showing kindness towards others.

"Just constantly being surrounded by it and, then, seeing how in love my parents are with each other and how loving they are with everyone around them. I knew that it couldn't just be because of their personalities, but it had to be because of a greater love. That just made me even more inspired about the faith and more in love with it."

She says she feels fortunate because she has never doubted the truth of the Catholic faith.

"I center my life around my faith. If I am ever struggling with anything in school, or with friends, or with anything, the first thing I do, usually, is to pray, and I feel a sense of calming to know that I have this Creator who loves me unconditionally," she says. "I know there is a Creator out there who is so incredible."

Her faith has made such a difference in her life that Delia wanted others to discover what she has. It is why she joined the Catholic Youth Leadership Team (CYLT).

"My sister was a member previously for a couple years, and I just remember going to Convention my first year and seeing all the members run in and then seeing how excited they were about their Catholic faith and how excited they were to share it with everyone there. And I really wanted to be part of that group," she says.

Shepherded by the Office of Lifelong Faith Formation, the Catholic Youth

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— Delia Bonner

Leadership Team is a group of high school-aged teens who serve their peers by helping to plan and lead diocesan youth events, such as the annual youth convention, the Journey retreat, and the middle school rallies.

"What we worked hard to do is look at all of our diocesan events for young people and to really call forth those leadership gifts and abilities that our young people have," says Maureen Provencher, diocesan coordinator of Youth and Young Adult Ministry. "At Journey, for example, this year, we had youth emcees who helped us keep on task for the weekend and lead us through the weekend, introduce different segments. We also had young people who helped with community building. We had young people who helped with prayer. We had young people who helped as small group facilitators."

Maureen stresses the importance of developing youth leaders for both the present and the future of the Church.

"Leadership development is about affirming and empowering young people to utilize the gifts and talents that they have been gifted with. Because they are the baptized, we're called to call them to leadership, because they, too, have something to give and contribute."

Maureen says the teens' gifts not only enhance diocesan events, but through the leadership skills they develop, they are then able to become more involved in their parish communities.

"Anything we do at the diocesan level is there to completely support the parishes," she says. "So, these young people are coming from these communities in order to go back to them."

"Even if you're not verbally saying 'I'm Catholic,' or 'I'm Christian,' or 'I have faith,' your embodiment shows it, so that every action is a flow into your faith and so that people can see that there is something driving you," she says. "Even if you don't talk to me, you can see God through me. Just acting as a window to Christ, I think, can make all the difference in the world."

Delia, age 17, who lives in the town of Easton and attends Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary Church in Presque Isle, says



(L to R): Sam Roussel, Evelyn Castonguay, Grady Connolly, Joshua Guillemette, and Emily Amann

Maureen says she has seen the difference CYLT can make.

“That is a real humbling thing, and that is a real privileged place for me to be, because I get to see the growth. I have seen young people who have served on CYLT move from being very shy to being very comfortable with being on stage and being able to rally a group,” she says.

Joshua Guillemette, age 18, from Saint Thérèse of Lisieux Parish in Sanford, says he is one of those teens.

“I was the quiet one in the room who never raised his hand at all. Now, I’ve stepped up to become the youth leader in my parish. It’s really helped me to develop a desire to help out all of my fellow students who are in youth ministry,” he says.

“He no longer is hesitant to speak in front of others,” agrees Shelly Carpenter, parish catechetical leader at Saint Thérèse. “With all the skills that he has learned, he can successfully lead peer groups, community builders/ice breakers, and has learned to be an effective prayer leader.”

Joshua says he was once socially awkward, but CYLT helped him to find his true self.

“I was trying my best to try to fit in, what would make me Mr. Popular, trying

to find happiness, and I just couldn’t find it,” he says. “Joining CYLT gave me the opportunity to channel my inner desire for wanting to do something for my faith.”

Evelyn Castonguay, age 17, from Saint Rose of Lima Parish in Jay, says she, too, felt lost before CYLT. She says she was struggling in high school and not putting in the needed work. She joined CYLT in her junior year and says it gave her a different perspective.

“It just helped me see who I was supposed to be. I was praying more and praying every night, ‘OK, help me to get through tomorrow and let me see what I’m supposed to be doing,’” she says. “Once I got to CYLT, I was participating more in my spiritual life and doing more with that, and then, it got my parents doing more in the church.”

She says not only did it enliven her spiritual life, but her grades improved as well.

“I’m not quite straight A’s, but most of my grades are A’s,” she says.

Evelyn says she joined CYLT after first attending New Evangelization Week (N.E.W.), a weeklong institute presented by the Office of Lifelong Faith Formation, which focuses on discipleship and evangelization. Prior to that, she says she

wasn’t very engaged in her faith. She says there weren’t many teens active in her church, so she followed suit.

“I didn’t think any differently. Why would I get more involved if I was already doing what everyone else was doing? And then, I got to N.E.W., and I saw everybody participating and doing all these things, and I was like, I kind of want to do that. And that really got me started,” she says.

Sam Roussel, age 18, from Saint Anne Parish in Gorham, had a similar experience. Although active in his parish, including as an altar server, he says N.E.W. gave him the opportunity to step away from the world and connect with God in a new way.

“To see 60 kids who are on fire about their faith just really encouraged me in my faith,” he says.

Sam says after seeing CYLT members at N.E.W. and again at the youth convention and Journey retreat, he wanted to join.

“There seemed to be this great camaraderie in the group, very close friendships that they had with each other, and I really looked up to the way they were sharing their faith and showing leadership at those events, and I wanted to be a part of it,” he says.

As a member of CYLT, he says he feels

called to be a model for others.

"It makes me more accountable than if I was just on the sidelines," he says. "And, especially, as one of the older students, to just show what these events can be and what you can get from them, show that leadership, too, for the younger kids."

Members of CYLT say they think it's important to have youth input in organizing the events.

"Adults are not always in tune with what is going to work and what isn't going to work," says

Emily Amann, age 18, from Saint Maximilian Kolbe Parish, Scarborough. "It's important to bring our ideas and our input as Catholic teens in the state of Maine to these retreats, put our ideas out there and help execute and lead them."

Although they acknowledge that it is still difficult at times, the CYLT members say being part of the team has given them the knowledge and confidence to offer their ideas and to better share their faith with their peers.

"Through it, I've been able to get more involved in my faith and learn about different things. It's let me do more," says Emily. "It's helped me be more open about it, my faith in general, and to invite people to stuff and just be more outgoing with my faith."

"I've definitely become more comfortable with speaking in public, leading prayers, and directing groups, things like that," says Sam.



"It's definitely connected me with amazing people who have helped me with my faith." — Emily Amann



"I've never been really afraid to be on stage and speak to people, but I definitely think being on CYLT has helped me be more comfortable speaking in front of people about something that I'm really passionate about, which is my Catholic faith," says Delia.

"I'm more comfortable speaking about it now than I ever was, because now I know what I'm talking about," says Evelyn. "Now, I can be open about it."

Evelyn, for instance, recalls her experience on Ash Wednesday, when fellow students asked her why she was skipping lunch.

"They're like, 'Why aren't you eating?' And I said, 'Because it's Ash Wednesday. It's the start of Lent.' And they're, like, 'Oh, what's Lent?' I explained it, and they were like, 'That's really cool. I didn't know that.' I explained about the 40 days and everything."

Although they declined her invitation, she did have the confidence to ask if they wanted to accompany her to Mass.

The CYLT members say one of the biggest benefits has been the friends they have made and the support system they now have.

"It's definitely connected me with amazing people who have helped me with my faith. I've made so many great friends," says Emily. "It's really great that you have one thing in common, and then, you can build upon that together. It's just something really special that you can have in different aspects of your life."

Although the group only meets a few times each year, the teenagers stay in frequent contact through texts, Facebook, and other means.

"We've all come to have such a close bond. It's a vital part of my life that I just love being a part of," says Joshua, who is discerning a vocation to the priesthood.

"We all have a great love for the Church and just great respect for each other," says Evelyn. "We are basically a family. We call each other the 'CYLT fam.'"

"If I feel discouraged, I know that I have people whom I can turn to who share my beliefs and values, and I think that's really important. I have people who can pray for me, and I can pray for them," says Sam. "We call it a family, and that is what it is." †

The Office of Lifelong Faith Formation

The Office of Lifelong Faith Formation, funded through the Catholic Appeal, supports the parishes of the Diocese of Portland in their evangelization and faith formation efforts. The office provides workshops and professional development for those in parish ministry. It assists parishes with baptism and marriage preparation and with divorce ministry. It sponsors events, retreats, and leadership training for youth, so that they may become more engaged in their parishes, and it works in cooperation with the Office of Campus Ministry to support young adults in the diocese. The office also offers Project Rachel retreats for those suffering from the pain of abortion.