

Collier Services helps troubled youth reach potential

By Dorothy K. LaMantia |
Correspondent

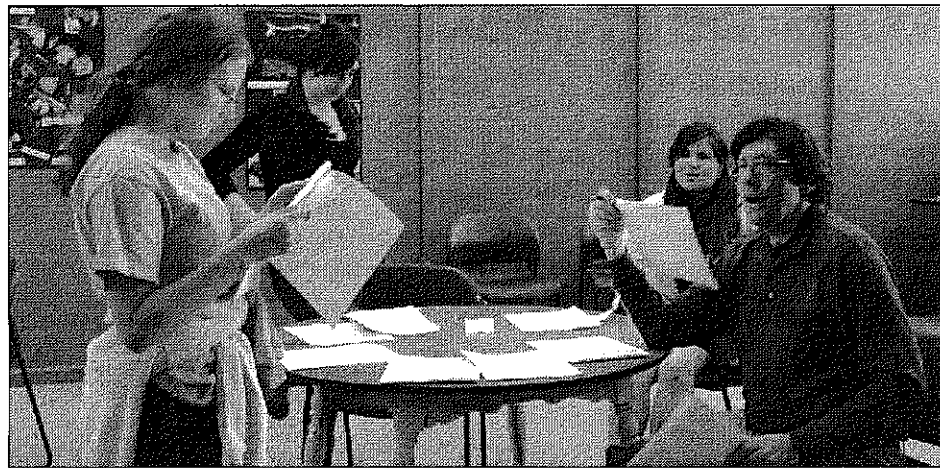
The spirit of St. Mary Euphrasia Pelletier, foundress of Sisters of the Good Shepherd, hovers over the 260-acre campus of Collier Youth Services.

Since 1927, when Mrs. Robert Collier bequeathed her property on Conover Road in Wickatunk to the Sisters to establish a residential school for neglected girls, the place has nurtured the potential of each of its students, honored their individual worth and embodied St. Mary Euphrasia's belief, "One person is of more value than a world."

In the mid-1970s the operation became Collier Youth Services, which includes Collier High School for at-risk students of both genders, a group home for teenage girls and a summer camp for disadvantaged students. While not strictly Catholic, Collier Youth Services is sponsored by the Sisters of the Good Shepherd.

The high school shares the grounds with Kateri Environmental and Summer Programs. Collier Group House for teenage girls and Collier House for young women are located in Red Bank and Keyport, respectively.

The driveway resembling a country lane leads to the high school. Trees and lawn set a tone of calm that continues inside the building where students talked collegially with their



Reaching New Heights — A Collier High School student auditions for a part in the school play with drama instructor Brian Breen. The school, part of Collier Youth Services, offers a wide range of opportunities in academics and the arts to troubled youth who could not excel in a traditional high school environment.

peers and the staff even as they race the clock during the change of classes.

"Hey, Mr. Bock," a senior called to the principal, Raymond Bock. "Did you hear I was accepted at NJIT to study robotics? That's where I am going next year!"

Like any school principal, Bock beamed as he watched the student strut up the stairs.

But Bock appreciated the announcement profoundly because he is at the helm of an alternative school, a haven for at-risk students who, because of physical or emotional disorders, or disaffection, could not remain in a standard high school.

"In a regular school," said Jackie

St. Angel, director of development at Collier, "many of these kids did not fit in and would not be in the school play or on a team. But here they can be. Here everyone is different, but here everyone feels welcome, part of a group, and that they belong."

Sister of the Good Shepherd Deborah Drago, executive director of Collier Youth Services, agreed.

"Schools teach tolerance," she said. "Should we settle for that? We want our students to be accepted."

Collier High School has 120 students and adds to its enrollment throughout the school year. Students reside in Monmouth, Ocean, Mercer, Middlesex, Somerset and Union Counties, with the tuition paid by the child's public school district. When a child graduates, his diploma bears the name of his own local school district because Collier's program reflects state standards. A tour of the campus revealed a program where academics and life skills mesh, allowing students to embrace education confident in their talents and proud

of their accomplishments.

"Seventy-five percent of our students go on to college," said Bock. "An additional 16 percent go to vocational programs," facts that substantiate the motto on Collier's website, "Where Small Miracles Happen Every Day."

Collier offers vocational training including culinary arts, cosmetology, building trades and computer programming. Students get on-the-job experience and opportunities to minister to the less fortunate, such as styling hair for the handicapped and the elderly in nursing homes.

Culinary students provided catering services when the Newark Boys' Choir performed at the school. In the school's greenhouses, agribusiness students cultivate 8,000 plants each spring, which are sold to Harry's Flower Farm in Morganville.

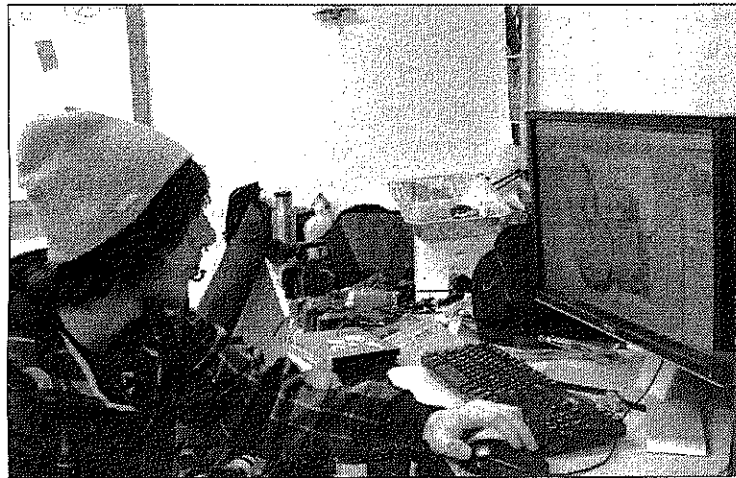
Sister Deborah commented, "We don't give our students value, they come here with value but they don't see it. They come to discover their own value, gift and potential."

Kateri Environmental Center, named for St. Kateri Tekagwitha of the Mohawk tribe of native Americans, neighbors the high school and provides year-round educational and recreational programs for children and families to promote love of nature and respect for the environment. Rich with woods and wetlands, fields and streams, the center is ideal for learning ecological principles. More than 4,000 people partake in the nature study programs each year.

Kateri Day Camp provides a summer program offering hikes, nature games, swimming lessons and reading skills improvement for 200 disadvantaged children ages five to 13, many of whom participate

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Prepared for Success — A student works on a 3D computer graphics project in Collier High School, Wickatunk. The students learn a variety of life and career skills to help them excel after graduation. Dorothy K. LaMantia photos



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courtesy of "camperships."

Two extended school year programs are offered. Project Eco is an ecologically focused six-week program for special education students, ages nine to 21. The program encourages hands-on learning and provides academic study in fun and creative ways as well as counseling and recreation. Job Experience and Training (JET) Program is a life and job skills program designed to help at-risk students become employable.

Collier Group Home in Red Bank is a residential program for 10 young teens who are unable to live at home because of longstanding family issues. The house is staffed 24 hours daily and prepares the girls to return home or to live independently. Girls attend school and receive counseling.

Collier House is located in Keyport for five women between the ages of 18 and 23 who are either homeless

or no longer eligible for NJ Foster Care. The staff provides stability and support and prepares them for independent living.

On May 20 from 7 to 11 p.m. Collier Youth Services will hold its 25th Annual Gala, "The Magic of Collier," at Spring Lake Golf Club to benefit its programs. Illusionist Joe Holiday will perform feats of comedy, illusions, and magic so that miracles can continue for the youth served by Collier Services. For reservations and sponsorship opportunities, visit collierservices.com or call 732-946-4771, ext. 213.