

## Catholic Advocacy: Mitty High School Students Put Conviction into Action

By Gwendolyn Holst, Archbishop Mitty Student, 2013

As one of 16 Archbishop Mitty High School students who attended the Ignatian Solidarity Network Teach-In (ISN) at Georgetown University, Nov.11-15, I felt the rush of excitement build while donning my suit, racing through the Hart Senate building, and knowing that my legislative skills were being put into action in a live and high-pressured context.

The impact that we students have as the emerging generation of Catholics and leaders is truly inspirational. Our four days in Washington provided substantial steps toward greater Catholic solidarity.

Goals for the trip were many: to deliver a Main Stage Presentation on conducting a Youth Advocacy Day, host a workshop on establishing advocacy programs at university and high school campuses, and meet with each of our Congressional and Senatorial offices--Reps. Anna Eshoo, Zoe Lofgren, Mike Honda, and Senators Barbara Boxer and Dianne Feinstein, concerning our specific legislative goals for the year.

Our Diocese of San Jose was well represented, as we recognized students from both Notre Dame High School and Bellarmine College Preparatory. The main stage presentation, given by Archbishop Mitty Senior Elise Sudlow, conveyed the theme of the conference: "The Gritty Reality."

Elise addressed a crowd of over 2,000 people at the Georgetown University Conference Center, emphasizing the importance of the nationwide Catholic network. Using her experience from California's Catholic Youth Advocacy Network Day (CYAN), she said, "Catholics are set up very well as a network. We have such expansive contacts and relationships that we have the potential to make an enormous amount of difference.

"The CYAN, the first event of its kind in California, was a huge success, and its participation is expected to grow this spring. This year's organizers anticipate over 600 high school students at the state capital." After recounting her personal experiences, Elise urged the audience to understand that immersion trips and acts of service are only the beginning of one's obligation to social justice. We need to make permanent solutions by following up in the political process.

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*Archbishop Mitty High School students who are called to action have joined together in the Mitty Advocacy Program (MAP). This group has become a leading force in California for advocating for issues of concern to Catholic communities, and for educating other Catholic high school students.*

*Gwendolyn Holst is a senior and is in her third year with MAP. She writes about the group's recent visit to Washington, D.C. to participate in the Ignatian Solidarity Teach-In at Georgetown University.*

Archbishop Mitty sophomore Carlisle Micallef affirms the importance of Catholic networking that Elise emphasized. After meeting with other influential high school and college students on the trip, she reflected, “It was quite an experience to network and attend the conference because we were communicating with other people our age who had the same concerns and interests we do.

“As young people, we were able to connect ideas and make relationships with others around the country doing the same work. By making those relationships, our advocacy work became stronger, more present, powerful and effective,” Carlisle said.

“These classmates and I became involved with networking and advocacy through membership in Mitty’s Advocacy Project (MAP), which aims to connect us directly with our legislators to help the most vulnerable. “Through MAP, we add a legislative component to the Catholic Church’s social justice teachings. We choose four bills each year at the federal and state level, and then meet with elected officials to garner legislative support for them.”

The four federal bills Mitty Advocacy students focused on were Foster Care, Human Trafficking, Gang Reduction, and improving conditions for returning and homeless Veterans.

While researching these issues, my eyes were opened to hardships of our country’s broken foster care system, the plight of trafficking victims in our neighborhoods, the overlooked solutions that would reduce gang violence, and, most of all, the lack of care and support for our country’s veterans.

I became especially sensitive to veterans’ affairs after learning that President Barack Obama announced the impending return of our servicemen and women this December. I recognized the urgency for provisions allowing them to have access to a decent quality of life.

Veterans’ affairs is an issue close to the Archbishop Mitty community as well. Mitty alumna Jennifer Jergens (Afflerback, Class of 2010) shared the story of her husband, Brian, who was severely injured in Afghanistan and is currently on the path to recovery at the Palo Alto VA Hospital. She helped us communicate the importance of our message about veterans during our Washington trip by writing a letter and providing photographs documenting her story.

Upon meeting with Senator Barbara Boxer’s office, we learned of an optional \$3 tax donation that she is proposing for the tax year; it will go to benefiting veteran housing. If it is finalized, we hope that our fellow Catholics can help spread the message to parishes and schools, that people should check the box this April so as to help the many men and women in uniform get the housing they need.

Through our lobbying efforts, the power of our network has become transparent to me. Last year, Governor Jerry Brown passed three of four bills that MAP worked on. The fourth, SB 9, concerning life without parole for minors, is up for re-vote during the next term, after a rocky start.

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Assemblywoman Nora Campos, a key legislator on the issue of juvenile sentencing, abstained from voting during the last hearing; please contact her office to urge an “Aye!” vote on SB 9. Inherently, advocacy work epitomizes the definition of the term “Catholic community.” It involves uniting all levels of the Church - from schools to dioceses, to the state Bishops’ Conference - to exercise a united voice to protect the vulnerable from budget cuts and other forms of neglect.

As Archbishop Mitty Principal Tim Brosnan states, “We as Catholics believe that Jesus provides us with the greatest model for action on behalf of justice, and He also impresses upon us the essential value of community, reflection, and celebration as necessary sustenance for those in the trenches.” Such support has allowed our organization to become the most advanced of its kind in the state of California. To connect with us, please visit our website:

[www.mittyadvocacy.wordpress.com](http://www.mittyadvocacy.wordpress.com).

### **Discussion Items**

1. List what specific actions these students took that form part of advocacy.
2. Identify what communities were influenced by the Archbishop Mitty students’ advocacy efforts. What positive effects or outcomes resulted from their advocacy?
3. Discuss how faith played a role in the advocacy process for these students.
4. Think about the ways you can turn “conviction into action” and become advocates in your school and community.

## **Catholic Youth Wins National Award for Service, Advocacy**

The Valley Catholic

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Sruthi Ramaswami, 18, of Los Altos, has been named a national winner of the 2013 Gloria Barron Prize for Young Heroes. The prize celebrates 25 public-spirited young people from across America who have made a significant difference. The top 10 to 15 winners each receive a \$5,000 cash award to support their service work or higher education.

Sruthi founded the Mitty Advocacy Project (MAP) to empower young people to make a difference in their communities through political advocacy. She created a legislative network of over 1,000 students who represent social justice issues and interface directly with state and federal legislators.

Teams of students research issues on poverty, education, immigration, and criminal justice, and identify bills designed to address these issues. Students lobby legislators in Sacramento, and have traveled to Washington D.C. to lobby at the national level.

Sruthi began her work as a high school freshman at Archbishop Mitty High School in San Jose, invited by a teacher to participate in Catholic Lobby Day, an advocacy event to lobby state legislators.

Inspired by that experience, she created MAP in her sophomore year to form a community of youth lobbyists. As the cornerstone of MAP, she founded California Youth Advocacy Day, an annual event to promote civic engagement.

For the past three years, over 600 high school students have taken part in the event, participating in issue-specific workshops led by MAP students and then lobbying their legislators at the state capitol.

MAP has grown to involve 100 students at Sruthi's school and has expanded to over 50 schools nationwide. "I've learned that mobilizing people to believe in and work toward a common goal is not just for adults," says Sruthi. "Motivation and self-belief trump age."

The Barron Prize was founded in 2001 by author T.A. Barron and was named for his mother, Gloria Barron. Barron Prize honorees are diverse, from many races and backgrounds. Half have focused on helping people in their communities and half have focused on protecting the environment.

"Nothing is more inspiring than stories about heroic people who have made a difference in the world," said Barron. "We need heroes today more than ever. The purpose of the Gloria Barron Prize is to focus on these amazing young people so their stories will inspire others."

This article was written and published in 2013.