

OLP Student Selected for National Award

The Southern Cross



A senior at the Academy of Our Lady of Peace

was one of only 10 students nationwide and the only one in California to win the Youth Virtues, Valor, and Vision Award from the National Catholic Education Association.

The award is given annually to Catholic school students in the United States who, through their selfless service, innovation, and commitment to social justice, are changing the world.

According to OLP's website, Isabella Cubillas founded and serves as president of the Tijuana Sin Hambre (Tijuana Without Hunger) social justice club at OLP, which supports a local nonprofit focused on ending hunger in that city.

Isabella volunteered more than 785 hours in 2021, delivering food and home goods to low-income families living in Tijuana. The group has 60 members and has helped more than 20,000 Mexican residents.

"Isabella is a tremendous representative of (OLP's founders) the Sisters



AWARD-WINNERS: Left, OLP senior Isabella Cubillas, center, is pictured with Dr. Lauren Lek and Matthew Cordes; right, Cathedral Catholic junior Courtney Ralph is seen with Principal Marlena Conroy, Stacy Wells and Dr. Julie Cantillon.

of St. Joseph of Carondelet, living out their charism of unifying love and their mission that all may be one," said OLP's head of school, Dr. Lauren Lek. "We are grateful to her for being an example to all of us, and for carrying on their tradition beyond these walls; beyond, even, this country."

Matthew Cordes, associate director of the diocesan Office for Schools, presented the NCEA award to Isabella on Feb. 1, during the national observance of Catholic Schools Week.

Also during Catholic Schools Week, a local high school student received the annual San Diego Catholic Seton Award. Presented by the diocesan Of-



fice for Schools, the award is named after St. Elizabeth Ann Seton, patron saint of Catholic schools.

Each Catholic high school in San Diego and Imperial counties was invited to nominate two juniors who best exhibit the values of faith, excellence and service. The theme for Catholic Schools Week, which was observed this year from Jan. 30 to Feb. 5, is "Catholic Schools: Faith. Excellence. Service."

The eight "distinguished nominees" from four local Catholic high schools each recorded a two-minute video via Flipgrid, sharing how they lived out one or more of the values. The com-

mittee selected one overall winner, Courtney Ralph of Cathedral Catholic High School.

Dr. Julie Cantillon, associate director of the Office for Schools, presented the award to Courtney on Feb. 15. Courtney received a certificate signed by Bishop Robert McElroy, a congratulatory letter from Schools Office Director John Galvan, and a \$500 college scholarship.

"Courtney is one of our most kind-hearted, genuine, respectful students," wrote Stacy Wells, dean of mission and ministry, in her nomination. "She lives her faith joyfully as Christ to others."

"An exceptional student," Courtney created a program to distribute Thanksgiving meals to families during the pandemic and is active in student government and campus ministry, Wells wrote.

The other nominees are: Esteban Murillo, Cathedral Catholic; Lora Frigerio and Morgan Pack, Academy of Our Lady of Peace; Nathaniel Kotnik and Jack Elgas, St. Augustine High School; and Margarita Alfaro and Maeve Hagarty, Mater Dei Catholic High School.

New Units

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apartments, but there are also 24 one-bedroom and 26 two-bedroom apartments. Eighty of them are designated for veterans and 270 for those with disabilities.

There is community space on each level of the building. There are also five outdoor gardens, including one where produce can be grown; a children's playground that boasts a view of the Coronado Bridge; pet-relief areas; and a large multi-purpose room that opens to a large barbeque area.

Residents also will have access to a host of comprehensive services offered by Father Joe's Villages, including those provided by its health center, employment and education services, and therapeutic childcare center.

"It's not just a matter of providing these homes," explained Deacon Vargas. "It's a matter of helping individuals to retain their homes."

Deacon Vargas said that Saint Teresa of Calcutta Villa "fills a very real need within the community."

He explained that San Diego has the fifth-largest homeless population in the United States, and the average market-rate studio apartment here can range from \$1,500 to \$2,000.

When the Turning the Key initiative was first announced, he said, there were "naysayers" who thought the focus on affordable housing was "misguided," given the immediate need of taking people off the streets and how long it can take to create new affordable housing.

Deacon Vargas said that Father Joe's Villages continues to offer more homeless shelter beds than any other homeless services provider in the county and



NEW HOMES: Saint Teresa of Calcutta Villa, located at the corner of 14th and Commercial streets, offers 407 units of affordable housing.

that creating affordable housing helps to free those beds for homeless individuals still sleeping on the streets.

"Housing is what breaks the cycle of homelessness," he said.

"At the end of the day, a shelter is not a home," explained Deacon Vargas. "A home is what we work towards, and that's what Saint Teresa of Calcutta (Villa) provides."

Deacon Vargas acknowledged that creating affordable housing does take time, noting that it took three years before ground was broken on Saint Teresa of Calcutta Villa and another two years of construction.

Future projects are currently in the works, although none of them are as large as the 14-story Saint Teresa of Cal-

cutta Villa, which is expected to house about 550 people at full capacity.

Plans for a second 14-story building, which was to be located at the intersection of 13th and Broadway and provide another 270 units of affordable housing, were abandoned after it was determined that the project would not be financially feasible.

Father Joe's Villages has identified four sites for new construction, as well as a few motels with potential to be refurbished. Each of these would provide between 80 and 120 new units of affordable housing.

Deacon Vargas said it will be a while before any of these are ready to welcome their first residents.

He estimates that it might be as long

as two years before ground is broken at the construction sites and perhaps another 12 to 18 months before construction is finished.

Similarly, Father Joe's Villages is still early in negotiations for purchasing the motels, he said. If those negotiations are successful, there will still be a yearlong capital campaign before the refurbishment can begin, meaning that it would probably be a minimum of two years before these units could be available.

But Deacon Vargas is undaunted by the lengthy process.

"It doesn't matter how long it will take. With God's help — always with God's help — we'll get this done, because we need to get it done. There's a dire need for it in the County of San Diego."