

## **Spiritual bonds**

### ***Students, parishioners share prayers, faith through program***

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correspondent

HENDERSONVILLE — For the fifth year in a row, teacher Mary Ashbrook at Immaculata School in Hendersonville paired her eighth-grade students with anonymous “spiritual sponsors” from Immaculate Conception Church.

“We are able to instill a sense of community of saints, a commitment between the school and the parish and between the generations,” said Ashbrook, who teaches religion and Spanish.

In an effort to teach beyond the classroom environment, Ashbrook instructs her students to take faith a step further in a greater appreciation for life based in Catholic community.

As eighth-graders begin their final year at Immaculata School, they are paired with adult parishioners who stay in touch throughout the school year through letters, cards and daily prayers for their students.

For some of the students, the sponsors are people they see regularly during the school day, unaware they have a special bond through prayer with them. For another student, the sponsor was the woman sitting behind her at Mass on Sunday; for others, they are unknown faces among the parishioners.

“I have done this every year since Maria began the program,” said sponsor Diane Salkewicz. “There is a spiritual bond for life when you are connected and praying for the needs of someone.”

“There is a positive presence in your life,” said Erin Brooks, Salkewicz’s special student. “It’s fun to get letters and nice to be prayed for.”

For the first time this year, Salkewicz’s daughter Jennifer was a sponsor to eighth-grader Courtney Altman.

“Eighth grade was a challenging year for me,” said Jennifer Salkewicz of her motivation for joining the project. “It would have helped then to know someone was praying for me. I will look forward to doing this again.”

Courtney Altman’s grandmother, Mary Wall Tucker, agrees the program is a benefit for the students.

“This has given her a sense of validation and a good connection to spiritual life. She’s aware now that God’s right there for her,” said Tucker.

A Mass and luncheon were held for program participants May 20. As they found their names on the tables, conversations began — strengthening the bonds that had been developing throughout the school year through cards, letters and heartfelt spiritual journeys that took both students and sponsors to deeper connection with their Catholic faith.

“You feel like there is someone to talk to about spiritual things,” said student Mia Maj of her sponsor, Gail Whitney. “We’ve become friends because we had each other in prayers.”