

The Inaugural Class Celebrates!

Graduating With Honors: Nine Headed To Prestigious Local Schools

Ethel Walker, East Catholic, NW Catholic Among Schools Admitting Grace's Inaugural Class

On Wednesday, June 12, 2013, nine young ladies of the Maria Sanchez class made history when they processed down the aisle of South Church's Meeting House for Grace Academy's inaugural graduation ceremony. The Maria Sanchez students came to us in 2010 like seeds packed with potential. Curious and eager, they settled into a learning environment that nourished their minds, hearts, bodies and spirits. Their journey at Grace Academy began with *Seed Folks*, our "one book, one community" read. Over the past three years, the girls grew and matured into aspiring young women bound for excellent high schools, fortified with a new bushel of hopes and dreams.

Our graduates, and their parents, were pioneers. When they enrolled in Hartford's first *Nativity Miguel* model school for middle school girls, they were stepping into the unknown. In their journey here, they interacted with students who began their lives in places like Peru, Thailand, Puerto Rico or Hartford. Grace Academy's teachers and administrators asked the girls to demonstrate academic motivation and make a commitment to an intensive extended-day, -week and -year program. Additionally, they had to embrace the core values of respect, leadership, courageous compassion, hospitality, joy and grace.

The 2012-13 year was probably the toughest, yet most rewarding. Back in the summer of 2012, the future graduates attended SSAT preparatory classes to help them prepare for the difficult high school entrance exams. "We brought together admission professionals as well as the kids' parents to assist them in finding the right school,"

said Ashley Gengras, GA's graduate support program leader. The students attended shadow days, interviewed admissions officers, completed applications, and wrote numerous essays for both applications and scholarship aid grants. Volunteers Kathleen Krackowsky, Gayatri Malik, Carolyn Norris and GA teacher Caitlin Clarke worked with each eighth grader to assist in this process.



Waiting for the Acceptance Letter

During the tense months when the Sanchez class had to patiently wait to hear from the high schools, the fifth through seventh grade students would pray for their eighth grade "sisters" during the daily Circle of Peace and Respect. Their patience was rewarded as word arrived: eight of the nine graduates were admitted to private schools and of these, two will attend the Ethel Walker School, two will start at East Catholic and two begin their freshmen year at Northwest

Catholic on very generous financial aid scholarships.

The Graduation Ceremony

Grace Academy's inaugural graduation ceremony was the culmination of three years of work; years filled with anticipation and great expectations. For the Maria Sanchez students, the day, in fact, the whole year, was not one of arrival but discovery. "Our girls are discovering their potential to be wholly themselves and how their personal gifts will benefit this world... From the opening prayer by Pastor Adam Soderberg to the closing benediction by Wendy Allerton, our Board Chair, the ceremony was filled with tears of joy, laughter, and plenty of worthy praise," Fitzsimons said.

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At graduation, Grace Academy bestowed awards upon four students who demonstrated strengths in areas that connect to the school's core values.

The Polaris Prize – awarded to the student who excelled as a beacon of outstanding scholarly achievement. The award was presented to the graduate with the highest academic standing - *Ximena Franco*

Mariposa Award (butterfly in Spanish) - awarded to the student who has demonstrated the most growth, personal development, perseverance, and overall effort throughout her years at Grace Academy – *Thi Ri Soe*

Maria Sanchez Award – awarded to the student who best exemplifies the spirit of her class's namesake, Maria Sanchez, this student exhibits energy, dedication, and passion and has become a transforming presence in the school community - *Paola Ocasio*

Grace Award – the highest honor; is awarded to the student who most embodies the school's core values of respect, courageous compassion, academic excellence, and grace - *Jessica Hariprasad*

Inaugural Graduation Class Profiles

Ceanna Diaz

High School: East Catholic High School

Place of Birth: Hartford. **Family:** Lives in Hartford with her mother Merari Ramos, and her younger brother Jaden. Merari works at Small Smiles.

Grace Academy Activities: Geography Bee, Yearbook, Newspaper – *North Star News*, Environmental Club, Jewelry Making Club, Needle Work Art, Year Book Club, Theatre - *The Brothers Grimm Spectaculathon and Bad Auditions by Bad Actors*, chorus, guitar. Sports: Soccer, Volleyball, Golf, Softball

Reflection on Grace Academy: “School has not been without its ups and downs but I’m proud of my time here and how I’ve grown. You learn something new every day, like Geometry or one of my favorite genres, Shakespeare. More than anything, I have my teachers to thank for that and for helping me learn how to deal with different emotions and to open up to people.”



Zaire Edwards

High School: The Arts Academy

Place of Birth: Hartford. **Family:** Lives in Hartford with her mother Sophia, who is a clinical social worker, and her older sister Endonesia.

Grace Academy Activities: Yearbook, Needle Work Art, Theater, Voice, Chorus Sports:Track

Reflection on Grace Academy: “I think I’ve grown here to respect my peers and teachers and school in general. For me, focusing isn’t always easy but being here has helped me to improve that. I’ve learned that it’s okay to be yourself. It will be hard to leave because there’s a sisterhood here – no one judges you, we all support each other and let everyone be themselves. We all love each other equally.”



Ximena Franco

High School: The Ethel Walker School

Place of Birth: Peru. **Family:** Lives in Hartford with her mother, Carmen, and father, Ramon. Carmen works at a local restaurant.

Grace Academy Activities: Student Council, Public Speaking, Chicken Soup for the Grace Girls Soul, Cooking Club, Theater - *The Brothers Grimm Spectaculathon*, Chorus. Sports: Volleyball, Golf, Track

Reflection on Grace Academy: “My experience here has changed my life. I’ve changed both personally and academically. Grace has challenged me to study

more, add rigorous subjects and learn how to be more comfortable speaking in public. It will be hard to leave this school because everyone has been so welcoming, right from the first day that I came through those doors into Gray Hall.”

Joeliz Gonzalez

High School: Northwest Catholic

Place of Birth: Puerto Rico. **Family:** Lives in Hartford with her mother, Elia, father, Joe, and younger brother Ryan. Joe works for Madico Window Films Northeast as the warehouse manager.

Grace Academy Activities: Theatre, Student Council, Band – trumpet, Creative Writing Club, Service Club, Food Justice, Dance, Fine Arts, Voice, Chorus. Theater - *The Brothers Grimm Spectaculathon & Bad Auditions by Bad Actors*. Sports: Volleyball, Basketball, Cross-country, Softball & Golf.

Reflection on Grace Academy: “This isn’t a school: it’s a family, a community where everyone knows your name. It’s made us better students. My long term goal is to get good grades and graduate high school so I can follow my dreams and attend college. Grace has changed the way I speak, the way I listen and how I feel. It’s changed my life.”

Jessica Hariprasad

High School: The Ethel Walker School

Place of Birth: Hartford. **Family:** Lives in Hartford with her mother Elizabeth, who works at Lord & Taylor, older sister Joy, and younger brother Jeremy.

Grace Academy Activities: Geography Bee, Student Council, Band – saxophone, Creative Writing Club, Jewelry Making Program, Cooking Club, Needle Work Art, Chorus, Theatre -*The Brothers Grimm Spectaculathon* Sports: Basketball, Track.

Reflection on Grace Academy: “I grew my confidence inside these walls. I believe I changed as a person because I learned how to greet people and be proud. In sixth grade I would retract into my shell and act shy towards my future peers but that slowly changed, because this school gave me opportunities to do speeches and even a radio advertisement. I will miss my friends and teachers but I know I’ll come back here.”



Paola Ocasio shedding happy tears

Paola Ocasio

High School: East Catholic High School

Place of Birth: Puerto Rico. **Family:** Lives in Hartford with her mother Lavette, who works at Catholic Charities, and her sisters Alanna and Epephanie.

Grace Academy Activities: Yearbook, School Newspaper – “*The North Star News*”, Creative Writing Club, Service Club, Journalism Club, Needle Work Art, Sculpture, Dance. Theater – *Bad Auditions by Bad Actors*. Sports: Volleyball, Softball

Reflection on Grace Academy: “My teachers and peers helped me grow here, to change in so many ways, emotionally, spiritually and academically. I even take advanced subjects! More than anything, I learned what a caring community feels like and what it’s like to have a sisterhood of friends. That’s been life changing.”

Destiny Padro

High School: Math & Science Academy

Place of Birth: Hartford. **Family:** Lives in Hartford with her mother Janices, who works at Medical Management Plus, and her younger brother Victor.

Grace Academy Activities: Yearbook, Music Club, Video Class made “Grace-licious”, Dance, Theatre, Sculpture, Cooking Club, Chorus. Sports: Golf, Softball.

Reflection on Grace Academy: “Before I came to Grace, I didn’t really take my education seriously; Grace changed that, they challenged me. We worked together as students and teachers and I love how the teachers helped each student during their own time, how they helped me. They challenged me to go above and beyond and made me believe that I could do the work. I’ll miss my teacher’s support and my friends and especially Ms. Gina – she’s really done her best to make Grace a comfortable place”.



Thi Ri Soe

High School: Northwest Catholic

Place of Birth: A refugee camp in Thailand. **Family:** Lives in Hartford with her mother Kee Lar, father, Han Sein, who works for Celebration Food Company, and her younger sister Moo Ku.

Grace Academy Activities: Environmental Club, Chicken Soup for the Grace Girls' Soul, Gardening, Cooking, Fine Arts, Theater - *The Brothers Grimm Spectaculathon*, Dance, Band – plays violin. Sports: Track

Reflection on Grace Academy: “I most value the education Grace gave me.

Education can grant you anything you want in the future, as long as you work hard. I’ve learned to become a person who wants to learn, who loves to learn and give a good effort. I tried to do that in Algebra and in my other subjects. I’m proud of being a Grace Academy student.”

Kayla Walton

High School: Rockville High School, Vernon

Place of Birth: Hartford. **Family:** Lives in Vernon with her mother Joyce, who works at Community Court, and her younger brother D’Ante.

Grace Academy Activities: Band – flute, Yearbook, Cheerleading, Environmental Club, Service Club, Film Club, Needle Work Art, Cooking Club, Dance. Sports: Soccer

Reflection on Grace Academy: “I’ve learned a lot of great lessons here. I’ve learned that if I want to be a certain way I have to embrace that and that not everyone is going to hurt you—that people really do care about me and about my future. I didn’t really know what I wanted to be when I came here, or who I was, but Grace has helped me figure that out. I want to be a singer and actress and dancer and maybe one day share my poems and fiction. Grace has pushed me to pursue this. I’ll never forget that”.



L to R: Joeliz Gonzalez, Ximena Franco, Zaire Edwards, Ceanna Diaz



L to R: Paola Ocasio, Destiny Padro, Thi Ri Soe, Kayla Walton, Tamar McFarlane, Sr. Mary Rose Crowley, SNDdeN., Gigi Moran, Luis Martinez



L to R: Kayla Walton, Thi Ri Soe, Destiny Padro, Paola Ocasio, Jessica Hariprasad

Grace and Covenant Prep Combine Voices against Guns and Violence

On June 5, students from Grace Academy and Covenant Preparatory School convened at Charter Oak Cultural Center for “young hARTford speaks: preventing violence in our town,” a symposium of music, word, art, and film. The evening was hosted by Frank Schiavone and Susan Campbell of Hartford2020.



Young Hartford Speaks is a non-profit that engages local people in ways to see a better future for the people of Hartford. On this evening, students addressed the gun debate topic. “It was the kind of evening where you’re sitting there and your mouth starts dropping open, these kids are that incredible,” Campbell said. Sabrina Williams (member of the Sojourner Truth, 7th grade class) spent hours on her speech for the event, left it at home, yet stood up at the podium anyway and delivered an awe-inspiring recitation as to why guns must be banned.

The evening included anti-gun artwork and Nepalese-style peace flags created by the Grace girls, and a beautifully sung rendition of Snoop Lions “No Guns Allowed” performed by Mr. Ginnetty and the boys from Covenant Prep. Thanks are owed to Susan Campbell, Charter Oak Cultural Center, Covenant Prep’s Meara Weaver, and the teachers in both schools who inspired the students’ work.

iPad Integration Boosts Math Scores *by Natalie Hubert*



Grace Academy students advanced their math skills this year through the integration of iPads provided as gifts from TicketNetwork. Math Workshop classes began in September for students showing a need for additional math instruction. Selected students met three times per week to receive reinforcement and re-teaching of grade level topics, each using an iPad and website program called IXL.

“It helped change the way our students approached math tasks and helped improve their skills,” said Lindsey McPhee, curriculum director. With the help of the iPad, McPhee says students started to exhibit high levels of engagement during extended math practice sessions which resulted in marked

improvement on school wide assessments.

Students also practiced computation using the Math Board App and taught concepts to classmates using the Show Me App. When asked what they liked most about math intervention this year, sixth grade students commented, “Using technology helps me out more because I am able to concentrate.” Another commented, “They help me focus more and math problems are more fun on the iPad than on a sheet of paper.”

Grace Academy also thanks CSC for giving each 7th and 8th grade student an HP laptop. Students at GA now have access to HP laptops, MacBooks (provided by the Carvel Foundation), iPads (provided by Ticket Network and The William & Alice Mortensen Foundation), and Kindles (provided by an individual donor).

Maria Sanchez visit the Capitol – Washington, DC



The Class of 2013 with Ms. Krmpotich at the reflecting pool and Washington Monument

The Maria Sanchez 8th grade class capped their year with an educational trip to Washington, DC, made possible by a grant from Target stores. “It was a wonderful culmination and celebration of the work and achievement of the first graduating class as the eighth grade social studies curriculum focuses on American History and the formation of

the Constitution and the Bill of Rights,” said Caitlin Clark, who led the trip. The trip was the first time these students had ever stayed in a dormitory and, for some students, the trip was their first time away from home. The overnights at George Washington University were, in themselves, educational, Clark said, as they provided a glimpse into college life and what could be expected of students as independent young adults seeking higher education.

Faculty and students toured the White House (viewing the garden that Michelle Obama wrote about in her letter to the Sanchez students), Holocaust museum, Lincoln Memorial (spending lots of time and reading the quotes on the wall), Vietnam memorial, Jefferson memorial, the new MLK memorial, they ate meals at a French café and a South African restaurant, and had time to go paddle-boating in the Tidal Basin, where they viewed the fabulous cherry trees. “We spent a lot of time walking by government buildings and museums, talking about the architecture, parks, and people, and just listening to passers-by speaking every language you can think of,” smiled Clark.

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To prepare for the trip in class during the year, the eighth graders had discussed the elections and current events such as gun rights, women's rights, domestic violence, social justice, and practicing the art of rhetoric and respectfully expressing differences of opinion. In their English Language Arts classes, students focused on the art of debate and how to set up a persuasive argument, as well as how to address a counter-argument, critical skills in becoming a well-informed, pro-active citizen in a democracy. There was also a unit on the Holocaust, where they read Elie Wiesel's *Night*, and had to research topics that examined aspects of the Holocaust. "All the things we learned in the classroom came to life in DC," said graduate Joeliz Gonzalez.

Athletics Program Adds Golf, Takes First Win In Basketball & Soccer

Grace Academy added golf instruction in the spring of 2012 and for the first time in 3 years carded wins in soccer—including an OT victory against Achievement First—and its first ever basketball win. Participation in sports is a required part of GA's program. After academics ends at 3:30 each day, the school runs a sports program on Mondays, Wednesdays and Thursdays. With a strong focus on good sportsmanship, team participation and skills development, the program is centered on significant seasonal sports including soccer, basketball, and track and field.

Essay: Losing Games, Winning Perspective ***by Bryan Cote***

Bryan Cote was inspired to write this article after viewing a video of the Maria Sanchez students. Each eighth grade student offered reflections on her experience at Grace Academy and the video was first shown at a fundraising benefit held at The Bushnell on May 30, 2013. The next issue will highlight this fundraising benefit .

May 2013: A movie appeared on a large screen to introduce the fundraising crowd to the Grace graduates: there was Thiri, the youngster from Burma who we took in on some days when she knew maybe 10 English words, who had so many double dribbles this year but never stopped hustling, and Zaire, who had little control over where she was running on the soccer field this fall, but somehow channeled that into a pair of steals in our first tie ever in school history. Then there was Jessica "Jess" – quiet at times, not athletically gifted, but had a smile stretching from Main Street to Mystic. She's also the girl who always dribbled into the corner just like I told her not to, the kid who didn't once look up when she had the ball but put it all out there even in defeat. She was always the last to go home after practice and the one who always picked up the balls and put them in the mesh bag after games, and said "thank you coach." And it was Jess, on this giant movie screen, being asked about the one thing she'll take with her from her three years here at Grace and all her experiences in and out of the classroom, all her academic and music lessons. This kid, whose teams at times left the court so many points down you wondered how or why they showed up at practice the next day in that damp basement gym on Main Street; the kid whose mom and dad raised a great kid and just couldn't afford signing her up for a youth league when she was in elementary school. It was this eighth grader, who doesn't have a drawer of YMCA shirts or medals or trophies like so many kids do – who this fall will walk the halls at Ethel Walker High School. Jess turns to the interviewer on the movie screen and says to the camera, "Something I'll take with me? You know I never had a chance to play sports as a kid...and Grace gave me a chance."

Jessica Hariprasad was my 2 guard this year on a 1 and 11 team, my middie on a 2-3 soccer team but she didn't talk about losing, she didn't talk about the reality that she probably won't make the varsity high school basketball team but as she said to that movie camera, she was given a chance. Perspective is a funny thing - some of us don't have it, some of us don't want it, and some aspire our whole lives to attain it. I suppose we could all use a good dose of it from time to time. For me, as a coach of a losing team, I got my perspective when I heard this quiet, brace 14 year old's words on that big movie screen.

Bryan Cote is the co-Athletic Director. He volunteered his coaching services in 2010, the founding year, and has devoted many hours to the girls' athletic development. Bryan coaches Grace Academy's soccer and basketball teams, has led a tennis program, organizes sports banquets and athletic field trips, is the editor of the Newsletter, and much more. His wife, Janine, has been a volunteer religion teacher since 2010 as well as an instructional coach to the AmeriCorps teachers.

Volunteer Profile: Gail Hughes



Gail grew up in Madison, NJ and graduated from Madison High School. She attended Furman University in Greenville, SC and graduated with a BS degree in Math. After graduation, Gail moved to Hartford, CT and worked as a Financial Analyst for Aetna Life Insurance Company. In 1988, Gail married Jack Hughes and they have three children. After working at Aetna for 12 years, Gail left Aetna to raise her family: Sean (Senior at Bryant University), Darci (Junior at Furman University) and Daniel (Senior at East Catholic HS). When the children were all in school, Gail started volunteering her time to work in the schools her children attended and with some local charities. Gail is the president of Peridot Foundation which makes grants to local charities. Gail is on the boards of Cherish the Children Foundation and Corpus Christi School. She volunteers as a mentor with AHM Youth & Family Services in Hebron. Gail is also a consultant for Creative Memories and enjoys working out at

CrossFit Thin Blue Line in Manchester. The Hughes family spends their summers on Cape Cod where Gail enjoys kayaking, boating and playing tennis.

How did you first learn about Grace Academy? I knew Matt Fitzsimons from Northwest Catholic (my daughter graduated from there) and he reached out to me when Grace Academy was being formed.

How have you helped GA? When I first learned about the start of Grace Academy, I asked the board of the Cherish the Children Foundation (CTCF) to sponsor some students there. I am on the board of CTCF which is a charity that helps children to reach their greatest potential. CTCF gives grants for children & their families who need financial assistance due to a child's illness or disability. I along with another board member, Guy Carbone, started an Educational Assistance grant program within CTCF four years ago. Guy introduced me to Covenant Prep where CTCF sponsored two students during the school's first year. So, we were happy to add students at Grace. We also sponsor one student at Northwest Catholic and one at East Catholic. We are very happy that next year the student that CTCF will be sponsoring at Northwest is a graduate of Grace Academy!

After visiting Covenant Prep & Grace Academy a few times, I decided that I'd like to volunteer on a regular basis. I majored in Math in college, so I prefer to tutor in Math. I have really enjoyed tutoring Math once a week at Grace. My daughter, Darci, graduated from Northwest in 2011 and is currently a student at Furman University in Greenville, SC (my alma mater!). Darci started tutoring at Grace during her Senior year at Northwest. She comes in with me to tutor when she's home on breaks. We both really enjoy spending time with the Grace students. It feels so good to see the students who know us. We love the hugs too!

What motivates you to serve organizations as a volunteer? I have always included volunteer activities as part of my life. My parents instilled that in me when I was young and Jack & I have taught our children the importance of giving back. As a teenager, I was a candy striper at a local hospital. In college, I participated with Collegiate Educational Service Corps by volunteering as a tutor, watching children at a daycare center, etc. After I left my full time job at Aetna, I had more time to be involved with a few different organizations. I really enjoy working directly with children.

What do you like about GA? I love the fact that these talented girls are given a better chance to succeed in life by attending Grace Academy. Every week when I go there to tutor for an hour, I get a smile on my face as I enter the building and see the girls! It's great to see them helping with their clean up jobs after the school day. It's great to see how the girls are maturing. I love the whole model of the school from the administration to the teachers to the volunteers. It is really rewarding for everyone involved.

Do you have any suggestions for people who may be interested in volunteering? We all have special talents that we should share with others. Grace Academy is one special place that you can be involved with and receive as much if not more out of it personally than you give. Being a small part of helping young girls achieve in life is such an incredibly rewarding experience! I'm so happy and proud to be part of Grace Academy.



Respect Leadership Courage Hospitality Joy Grace

The Inaugural Class Celebrates *(continued from front cover)*

The Maria Sanchez students began the program as they began every day...with the Grace Academy pledge. Class Teacher and Advisor Caitlin Clarke shared vignettes about each student and how their personal talents benefitted the community and then the graduates offered their own thanks for the staff, including Gina Bolduc, Heather Maynard, Ashley Gengras, Sulva Bray, Caitlin Clarke, Matt Fitzsimons, and for their parents.

“You got us here every day for three years, even on Saturdays,” graduate Joeliz Gonzalez said to the parents. “You have supported us, pushing us to be our best, being tough on us when we needed it, but always loving us unconditionally.”

Grace chose a true role model to deliver the inaugural keynote address. One of eight children, Gwendolyn Smith Iloani was born in Jamaica, moved at a young age to Brooklyn, NY, and used scholarships, loans, and a job at the local library to finance her education at Colgate University, where she studied Sociology. Gwen later earned an MBA from the University of Hartford and today is the president and CEO of her own company, Smith Whiley in Hartford.



“She was someone the kids could relate to, a real success story – it’s important that the graduates and the other Grace students see that they can achieve anything,” said Clarke.

“You control your destiny so develop your own plan for your life, never limit yourself – you have to take risks,” Iloani told the students, sharing advice about learning from the experiences of older people and believing that greatness “lives in each of us”.

School co-founder and curriculum director Lindsey McPhee recognized the teachers who have been with Grace Academy since its founding (Sulva Bray and Caitlin Clark). Soon-to-be Ethel Walker freshman Jessica Hariprasad gave the farewell remarks.

“When I first came to Grace Academy, I was nervous and scared because I didn’t know what to expect...I have spent three years here and I’m convinced that Grace Academy is a special place,” said Harisprasad. “There’s a great sisterly bond here with the Maria Sanchez class.”

Fitzsimons agrees. “You helped shape this school’s culture,” he told the Maria Sanchez graduates. “All of us have watched you mature into leaders who looked after and helped nurture your younger classmates. You show us that the hope for the world lies within each of you.”