

Faith-filled Commitment: A Young Teacher Reflects

By Catherine Walsh

Shannon Keating's connection to South Boston Catholic School students could have ended last June. After all, she had completed her two-year commitment through the Urban Catholic Teacher Corps to teach at Gate of Heaven School – now part of the newly formed South Boston Catholic Academy. With a master's degree in education from Boston College and outstanding references, she could have gone anywhere.



But on the first day of school at South Boston Catholic Academy this fall, “Ms. Keating” (as she is known to students) proudly led a group of seventh graders into the new school. After prayer, the Pledge of Allegiance, and Principal Nancy Carr’s welcoming words to the middle school, Keating shepherded her students up the stairs to their homeroom. “Let’s keep a straight line,” she called out, smiling at the kids. A petite, youthful 25-year-old, Keating didn’t look much older than some of her charges.

No sooner had 13 students taken their seats than Keating had them stand up. “Now I want to see everyone fully tuck in their shirts,” she said, her voice at once commanding and kind. Everyone complied. Then Keating clicked on her SMARTboard and brought up a slide titled “Keating’s Law.” She told students warmly: “We are going to have a wonderful year, particularly if everyone honors the rules.” (See sidebar for the 10 rules of Keating’s Law)

Creating a powerful learning experience for students is what Keating is all about. And working in a Catholic school, she believes, gives her an edge. “Being able to pray freely throughout the school day makes such a difference,” she said in a recent interview. “When a child can say he or she wants to pray for a classmate who is out sick, when students can use the words and example of Jesus openly, the atmosphere becomes very supportive for learning.” Asked if this is why she

chooses to stay in Catholic education, Keating nods. “The sense of a faith community that I find here and the dedication to academic excellence is a wonderful combination.”

Interestingly, Keating’s first experience of Catholic education didn’t come until she enrolled at Boston College as an undergraduate. She had been active in her parish, St. Mary of the Sacred Heart in Hanover, MA, in high school – serving as a Eucharistic minister, lector, and CCD teacher. But nothing prepared her for her powerful experiences at BC. “The challenge to be a better person, to think about the world around you and how you can be of service was something I really gained from the Catholic community there,” she said. Trips to Appalachia and later to Africa to work with the poor on spring and summer breaks convinced her that her post-college life had to involve faith-filled service. “I was trying to figure out ‘What is my ministry?’ when I saw a sign for the Urban Catholic Teacher Corps one day during my senior year,” said Keating.

Knowing that her professional goal was to be a teacher – “I’d wanted to be a teacher since kindergarten” – Keating was thrilled. “Here was this opportunity to learn how to teach in a way that was community-based and faith-based,” she said.

How the Urban Catholic Teacher Corps or UCTC works is both straightforward and profound. Members of the Corps – six are chosen each year through a highly competitive process – teach in an inner city Catholic school for two years while earning a tuition-free master’s degree from the Lynch School of Education at BC. The four pillars of the program are: simple living, community (both first-year and second-year Corps members live together in a former convent in Dorchester), service through teaching, and spirituality.

“It’s very important to have a community when you are doing service,” emphasized Keating. “The first year of teaching can be tough, and to be able to sit around and hear 13 people talk about their day is very, very helpful.” Weekly reflections and communal prayer also make a difference, she added, as does the mentoring of first-year UCTC participants by second-year Corps members and alumni Corps members.

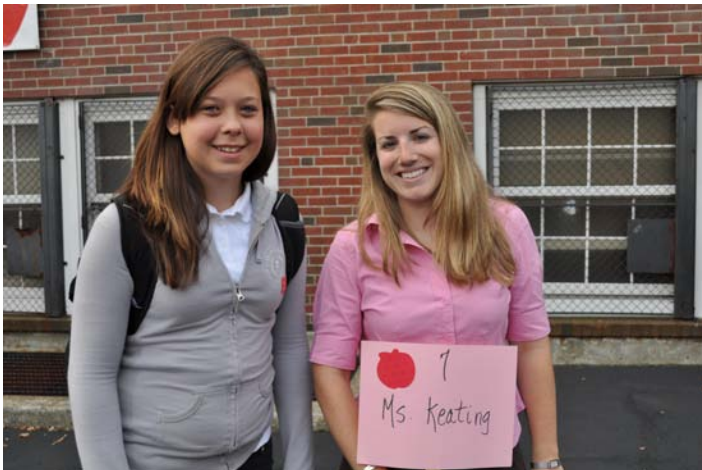
From the beginning of her participation in the UCTC program, Keating felt “very supported and welcomed” at Gate of Heaven School, where she taught 6th, 7th, and 8th graders social studies,

The 10 rules of “Keating’s Law”

- Respect yourself, your classmates, and all faculty and staff
- Always try your best and produce quality work
- Raise your hand and wait to be called on before speaking
- Be an active listener
- Stay organized
- Be honest
- Learn from your mistakes
- Challenge yourself – that is how you will grow
- Practice random acts of kindness
- Be positive and enjoy learning

vocabulary and religion. “Sister Pat McCarthy, the principal, took me under her wing and that made a big difference,” recalled Keating.

The daughter of a teacher – “My first and foremost educational hero is my Mom” – Keating exudes a contagious energy when discussing education. She believes, for instance, that children are meant to be “active participants in their own learning.” On an assessment of 8th graders in her social studies class last year, the final question was: “What does it mean to be a good leader? Do you think Abraham Lincoln was a good or bad leader? Explain why or why not.” She explains her motive behind the question this way. “Beyond having my students understand essential themes, concepts and terms of the Civil War era, I wanted them to think deeper and discover on their own what leadership meant to them.” Students also worked in groups, took on the role of teacher, and presented key concepts of the Civil War to the rest of the class, Keating said.



Studying the 2008 presidential elections was also exciting for both her and her students, she continued. “I always say that it was in those discussions that I felt most alive with my students. The kids were not taking notes from a board, they were not scrambling to memorize definitions, rather they were living history. They were informing themselves to be participants in society not because they were 18 and could vote, but

because they were 12, 13, and 14 and felt empowered to discuss these political ideas and voice their own opinions.”

Keating participated in a week-long social justice seminar over the summer sponsored by the “Facing History and Ourselves” program. Based in Brookline, Facing History helps educators explore and teach key moral and civic lessons from such historical events as the Holocaust and the Civil Rights Movement. The seminar attended by Keating and South Boston Catholic Academy Principal Nancy Carr was titled *Choices in Little Rock*, and Keating found it to be a “very profound, deepening experience.” She added: “It made me realize the importance of communicating with my students about how individual choices – even of young people like the Little Rock 9, the students who integrated Little Rock High School – can and do change society. In my teaching, I am now constantly urging the kids to think about moral decision-making and the connections between what goes on in our classroom and the world around us.”

Principal Carr said it was a “privilege” to attend the Facing History seminar with Keating. “The enthusiasm and knowledge that Shannon is sharing with our middle school students is wonderful,” continued Carr. “South Boston Catholic Academy is blessed to have such a devoted and talented teacher.”

Caitlin Keeton, a leader of the UCTC program and a former UCTC participant, calls Keating “a natural teacher.” She continues: “Shannon sees teaching as much more than a job; it’s a vocation, a chosen lifestyle. Her heart and mind are always focused on her students and how she can improve her teaching and their learning.”

For Keating, the academic and the spiritual go together. She knows the financial sacrifice she is making in forgoing a public school teaching position. But she points to the advantages of South Boston Catholic Academy, with its “wonderful faculty and staff” that pull together in the name of faith and academic excellence, with its small size that enables teachers to know the siblings of their students.

Keating is temporarily living with her parents and is about to enter a whole new kind of community – she is getting married in mid-October to a fellow BC grad named Joseph Kwiatek whom she met while volunteering in Appalachia as an undergraduate. But career-wise she doesn’t see herself changing course. “Ideally I will teach in Catholic education for the long run,” Keating says.

What else you should know about Shannon Keating:

- Her favorite book is “To Kill a Mockingbird.” She also loved “Tuesdays With Morrie.”
- She enjoys being outdoors and her favorite season is fall.
- She and her fiancé Joseph Kwiatek have asked Tammy Liddell, a member of the Campus Ministry team at Boston College and a mentor to the couple, to do a reflection at their wedding.

For more information about South Boston Catholic Academy, go to <http://www.sbcatholicacademy.org/>

For more information about the Urban Catholic Teacher Corps, go to <http://www.bc.edu/schools/lsoe/cce/prek-12/uctc.html>

For more information about Facing History and Ourselves, go to <http://www.facinghistory.org/>

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