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Program allows women to be students and moms

By ASHLEE SCHUETTE
Catholic Voice

For 18-year-old Ashley Fast, not going to college was never an option. Not even when she found out she was pregnant with her daughter, Ariana.

"I didn't think for one second that I would give Ariana away, nor would I not graduate or not go to college," she said. "It was just something that had to be done, and Ariana came along for the ride."

The ride took Fast and 3-month-old Ariana to College of Saint Mary (CSM) in Omaha where she enrolled in the Mothers Living and Learning program (MLL).

The program, she said, enabled her to get an education to provide for a better life for her and her daughter.

Now, three years later, Fast will graduate magna cum laude this month with a bachelor of arts degree in paralegal studies and a minor in art. She plans to attend law school this fall.

MLL, a program started in the fall of 2000 by Sister of Mercy Maryanne Stevens, CSM president, and Dr. Tara Knudson Carl, senior vice president, is a residential option for single mothers who want to pursue a college degree while living on campus with their children.

Knudson Carl said the idea started with one student who became pregnant and wanted to stay on campus.

"Our current traditional housing wouldn't be sufficient," she said. "It was the first spark of an idea that we could serve a niche of women who are single mothers trying to make their lives better for themselves and their children by living on campus directly where their resources are."

The top floors of the Walsh Hall dormitory on the CSM campus are dedicated to space for the MLL program and can house 35 mothers with up to two children each.

The dorms include a community area with a computer lab and four community bathrooms that include sinks, showers and bathtubs. It also has two large playrooms, four community kitchens, two laundry rooms and 24-hour security.

For Samantha Rambo, who moved to the CSM campus with 2-year-old daughter, Ann Marie, living in the dormitories through the MLL program was a blessing.

"Nursing school took time away from work and I could not afford my bills one month," Rambo said. "I talked to my aunt and she mentioned the MLL program to me."

Two weeks later, Rambo and Ann Marie were living on campus.

Rambo will be graduating with her associate of science in nursing degree this month. She plans to continue the program in the fall and earn her bachelor of science in nursing.

One benefit of the MLL program, Knudson Carl said, is that it helps single mothers continue their education in a community living situation where they can be recognized as parents as well as college students.

"I think the program is a great alternative for single moms and makes getting a college degree much easier than trying to do it alone or living off campus," Fast said.

Fast was thankful she had the chance to be a regular student and live on campus similar to other girls who did not have children.

Both mothers agree that being in the MLL program has opened their eyes to new cultures and new people.

"I've met a bunch of different moms and children from all over the country of different ages, backgrounds and perspectives," Fast said. "Things can be little crazy at times, but in the end, you know that everyone is there for the same reason - to get her education and create a better life for her and her children."

Because the program has been so well received, CSM officials plan to start a fundraiser in the near future to build a new residence hall dedicated to the MLL program.

"Potentially, two years from now, we could be preparing to open a new hall," Knudson Carl said. "It's an exciting possibility for us at this point."

With the addition of a new director of MLL, Knudson Carl said the campus also will increase the support and education provided to single parents at CSM.

During their journey through college with children, both Rambo and Fast said they have gained experience and resources to pass on to others.

This summer Rambo plans to do volunteer work with women and children.

"I want to focus on women in shelters who may need help with job skills, getting to college or getting their GED," she said.

Fast currently serves on the board of directors for the Eastern Nebraska Community Action Partnership, which helps individuals out of poverty and on the road to becoming self-sufficient.

Knudson Carl said one of the most impressive things about the program is how the students support each other as single mothers.

"I think many of (the students) find a community where they help each other with support, babysitting and there's someone else who understands what it's like to try and get a college degree while being a mother," Knudson Carl said. "I admire so many of them for how they juggle so many things."



Ashley Fast, a student in College of Saint Mary's Mothers Living and Learning program, reads to her daughter, Ariana, on her lap, and Ty'sha Hampton, daughter of Precious Hampton, also a MLL student. Courtesy photo.

