

## Girls feel Mercy offers brighter future

**ROBIN L. FLANIGAN**

Jalisa Egues wasn't used to getting Bs, but after transferring from the Rochester City School District to Our Lady of Mercy School for Young Women in Brighton, she was having a hard time keeping up with her homework. There was just so much of it — *every day*. “It wasn't like a little jump,” the 13-year-old says of the transition. “It was like a five-step jump... little by little, I started hanging on. Now, it's still hard, but I know I can do it so I keep trying. If I don't understand something, I keep asking questions.”

Jalisa is one of two seventh-graders who attends Our Lady of Mercy because of a program at Cameron Community Ministries, an urban outreach community center in the Lyell-Otis neighborhood. The girls will speak on Monday at the Cameron's 2016 Christopher T. Allen Memorial Golf Tournament, at Penfield Country Club. With 98 percent of the children Cameron serves living in poverty and considered at risk, the nonprofit organization created The R& R Group — respect and responsibility — to teach life skills to girls in grades four through six. Proceeds from the tournament help to support Cameron's youth programs like R& R, which carries the motto “Be strong, be confident, be fearless, and stick to your goals.”

Maddie Quercia, who graduated from Our Lady of Mercy in 2010, is a longtime Cameron volunteer. During a discussion about where the R& R girls wished to go to school and college, she had offered to set up a tour of her alma mater. As it turns out, 10 girls attended the tour, eight took the national placement exam (required for admission), and only two were accepted: Jalisa and another student, seventh-grader Kaila Toppin, also 13.

“I'm so grateful for them,” Kaila says of the people at Cameron, her voice breaking. “They are so important... They taught me about how to be a lady. Someday I want to make it into Harvard and become a pediatrician.”

Katherine Warren, Cameron's youth programs director, made it clear to the girls' families early on that everyone had to be invested in making sure this arrangement was successful: “We told them if they're willing to dive into this with us, we'll walk along with them their whole journey.”

### **Paying tuition**

Cameron has raised nearly \$13,000 to help cover tuition costs, supplies and uniforms. One volunteer built a desk for Kaila because she didn't have one at home; Cameron staff drove the girls to the school tour and took each girl's parents for a tour and to meet the admissions counselor, shopped for school supplies, helped the girls set up their lockers, and drove Kaila to school on the first day of classes because she didn't have a ride.

“They've helped out in every possible way,” says Jalisa's mother, Luz Santiago. It used to be difficult for her daughter to envision herself as a college student. “Now, she sees that's just what happens, that this is how it's supposed to go. The sky's the limit.”

Cameron is considering other schooling options for R& R girls for future years, including the Urban-Suburban Interdistrict Transfer Program and STEM programs within the Rochester City School District, according to executive director Jennifer Muniga.

“We want to keep exploring learning opportunities for these students, who we know can handle it,” Muniga says.

## Long road ahead

The after-school program has offered a separate R& R group for boys, all currently fourth-graders, since last year, and has planned a mentoring partnership with Brighton's McQuaid Jesuit High School. There's a long road ahead to get Jalisa and Kaila from seventh grade to a high school diploma, but the girls, who both play basketball and hope to be scouted, show no signs of slowing down.

"It's amazing to watch them work so hard," says Warren. "They always tell me, 'Miss Katherine, will you be there at our graduation?' And I say, 'Yep, we'll be there.'" Jalisa, who plans on staying in touch with Cameron after graduation to help other girls pursue their academic dreams, treasures the chance to focus on her future, something she couldn't picture before — let alone her attendance at a private school like Our Lady of Mercy.

"We always prayed every single day, and my mom said we were going to leave it in God's hands," she says. "When they accepted me, it showed me they see something in me that sometimes I don't see in myself."



**Cameron Ministries' R& R Program works with students Kaila and Jalisa in their pursuit of a private-school education.**

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