



# CLIMBING HIGHER

The Mount offers opportunities to take on a range of peaks to help students reach personal and professional goals while also contributing to the common good.

By Richelle Thompson

Often, mission statements become well-intentioned but dusty art, hanging in administration buildings but not taking hold in the places where students live and learn. That's not the case at the Mount. Here, the mission statement is a living, breathing document, enfolded in a bevy of programs and initiatives committed to helping students climb to new heights of learning, service, and community. Students and faculty alike can casually rattle off the core values of the mission statement, easily drawing connections from their classroom education to the knowledge and experience gained in relationship with one another.

"Coming in as a freshman, I wasn't really expecting that our mission statement would be lived out so much," says Emily Etris, a junior studying early childhood education and special education. "Our classes, activities, campus life . . . they all align. My experiences here are helping me be intentional about living out the mission and seeking common ground and the common good. The Mount is preparing me to take that into my practice as a teacher."

Grounded in the spiritual values and vision of its founders, the University's mission is to "educate its students through interdisciplinary liberal arts and professional curricula emphasizing values, integrity, and social responsibility."

When the Sisters of Charity opened the College of Mount St. Joseph in 1920, they paved the way for 20 women to expand their education and horizons. More than 100 years later, the Mount continues to seek new ways to help students climb higher, revolutionizing the educational field, on campus and off, locally and nationally.

"From the very inception of the University in 1920, the Sisters of Charity started Mount St. Joseph to respond to the needs of their time, and that's what we're continuing to do today," says Sister Karen Elliott, C.P.P.S., director of Mission Integration.

The Mount's ethos of incorporating its mission into every aspect of campus life is evident in a wide range of programs and initiatives, helping students climb higher throughout their college experiences.

**MISSION AMBASSADORS**

The Mission Ambassador Program began three years ago with the premise of supporting students who epitomize and embrace servant leadership. Its initial success was bolstered earlier this year with a sizable gift from the Sisters of the Precious Blood, Sister Karen Elliott's, C.P.P.S., religious community. Their generosity will support three years of the program, enabling Sister Karen and others to expand programming and opportunities.

About 10 to 12 freshmen are chosen each year to serve as Ambassadors. While the program is an extension of the Mount's continued commitment to its Catholic heritage, students come from Catholic and Protestant traditions; some are religion majors, others education or business. What binds them together is their desire to live the mission of the Mount and their willingness to listen to God's call for their lives, Sister Karen says. The program supports their discernment. For instance, this semester, the Ambassadors are taking a class on the prophets of the Bible and exploring how they are called to be prophetic voices in the world today.

As Ambassadors, the students receive a \$1,000 award each semester. In addition to maintaining their grades, they are required to meet regularly for prayer, retreats, and educational programs, be active in their local congregations and the Mount's non-denominational community, and participate in on-campus activities.

Service is central. The Ambassadors started a Prayer Warrior's group and an Interfaith Club. They helped with new student orientation and established Lions for Life, an organization focused on the importance of life at all stages, from womb to tomb.

"The Mission Ambassador Program brings a sense of community around the campus," says Monica White, a junior religious studies major. "We are rooted in the mission of the University . . . to bring a welcoming environment for all students, centered in Christ's love."

During the height of the Pandemic shutdown, some of the Ambassadors

approached Sister Karen about a project to support her religious community. They made 110 prayer jars, a tangible reminder of connection in the midst of the Pandemic's isolation.

"You should have seen these big football players sitting on the floor in the chapel putting lace on a prayer jar," Sister Karen says. "When I hear people complain about today's youth, I think, 'You need to come over to the Mount, and I can introduce you to some young people who will buoy your heart and give you hope because they're amazing.' They give you such hope, not just for the future but for now."

The Ambassadors are intentional about being in conversation and community with a variety of people. Etris says it has helped her live into one of the core values of the Mount's mission statement: respecting and honoring a diversity of cultures and beliefs.

Sister Karen says the Mount looks to the Mission Ambassadors to inspire and encourage not only their fellow students but also the faculty and staff. They are the guides, carrying their faith and the Mount's mission to new heights within the University and beyond.

"These young people are good leaders now," Sister Karen says. "We need to capitalize on their enthusiasm and faith. We need to let them lead now. They have great ideas and great energy, and we need to get out of the way and let them shine."



Kamryn Magee, Emily Etris, Ella Hartung, and Audrey Johnston, growing in their spirituality and community on the Rise Retreat.



Noah Shrock, Taylor Whitehead, and Emma Godfrey.



The Mount's Mission Ambassadors regularly engage in conversation and community.



"Spoon River Requiem" Performance. Photo by Mark Byron.



Choir performing in Mater Dei Chapel. Photo by Don Denney.



Art Guild students working with Tom Tsuchiya, local artist.

**MSJ RENAISSANCE: ARTS AT THE MOUNT**

When Michael Sontag, Ph.D., became dean of the School of Arts and Humanities eight years ago, three students were registered for band. So, he did what few other deans would. He joined the band and played bass drum for a year.

Now, the band has outgrown him, largely thanks to the MSJ Renaissance. The initiative provides a \$500 per semester award for students who participate in Arts at the Mount, including the University Band, University Singers, Theatre, and Art Guild. The program keeps expanding—Peak Productions (videography) and Writer's Block launched this year. As the Mount continues into its second century, these programs are creating a true renaissance of the arts that is impacting both the University and the surrounding community, elevating the student experience and what it means to have a liberal arts education.

"I love having biology students playing in the band and business students who want to do some writing," Sontag says. "These awards go back to the Renaissance idea that a person can

have lots of interests—in the sciences, in literature, in philosophy and in the arts. We are committed to educating the whole person."

This philosophy rings true for sophomore Kaitlyn Schulte, a communications and new media studies major. She says the award not only helped her pay for schooling but also fueled a personal transformation.

"I used to be a very reserved kid. I didn't really talk to people, nor did I like to do things I wouldn't normally," she says. "Theatre has shaped me into the better person I am today, and I am forever grateful. It opened a lot of experiences that I never would've thought possible."

Noah Douglas, a liberal arts and computer science major, joined the new Writer's Block program.

"I think that it is amazing that the Mount offers these awards and gives students who are creative in some way a chance to express that creativity while being supported," Douglas says. "The Renaissance Awards fit very well into the idea of integrating life with learning, contained within the University's

mission statement. Writing, not purely for a class but writing freely, is a part of me, and I like the ability to have that expressed in my education."

The awards have lived up to their name, sparking a campus-wide renaissance in the arts: the band now has 38 members registered. The University Singers has 48, and the Art Guild, which launched in 2020, started with 14. This year, 25 students are taking the MSJ experience to new heights with creations like the Behavioral & Natural Sciences Mural—featuring iconic scientific elements and themes.

"When people are in high school, they feel like they can try these different things, but when they get to college, they often feel like, 'Oh, that time of exploration is over. Now, I need to focus narrowly,'" Sontag says. "We encourage students to focus on their major and career goals, but we want to remind people that there's more you can do. You can still express your creativity and be in community and create with other people. I feel like if you do that when you're in college, you're set to find ways to do that for the rest of your life."