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Family credits strong Catholic education for daughters' career choice

by Christina Leslie by Catholic News Service

TRENTON, N.J. -- In the parable of the sower, Jesus taught his disciples that God's word must be nurtured to yield a fruitful harvest, words that four members of the Briant family -- sisters -- have taken to heart.

Alison Briant Burley, Ellen Briant Reilly, and Susan and Katelyn Briant are Catholic educators.

Their parents, Doris and Thomas Briant, made sure they all had 12 years of Catholic education, despite the prospect of all that tuition.

"My motivation was to show (our) commitment to Catholic education," Doris said. "We didn't have family vacations, we went to Cape May for the day. You can give up all those trips to Disney World. The benefits you get (from Catholic education) are better than all those trips to wherever."

Doris herself is the product of 12 years of Catholic school. She and Thomas, who became a Catholic when daughter Susan was born, will be married 35 years this September.

The couple praised two people in particular for having a good influence on their daughters: the late Sr. Juliana Naulty, a Dominican Sister of Hope who was principal of St. Joseph School in Toms River, and the late Fr. William P. Gardner, parochial vicar at their parish, St. Joseph, also in Toms River.

"Sister Juliana demonstrated to all the girls that being a Catholic educator went beyond the classroom walls," Doris told *The Monitor*, newspaper of the Trenton Diocese. "She celebrated with them in their victories and supported them when they were down, (and) she knew the best way to help her students was to help their families. All four were honored to have known her."

"Father Bill cared for parishioners with a Christ-like compassion," she added.

"I truly feel that my parents gave me a gift in my opportunity to attend Catholic schools; I want my children to have the same experience I was given -- an education of the whole person," Alison Briant Burley said in a telephone interview, her sons' laughter clearly audible in the background. "I want them to be encouraged and empowered to be their best selves by nurturing their faith and their minds at the same time."

Burley, 32, taught freshman and sophomore religion and freshman English classes at St. Rose High School in Belmar and also was assistant campus minister and director of the Kairos Retreat program. She took a sabbatical after the birth of her first child, but still conducts faculty retreats and prayer services at St. Paul School, Princeton.

She earned bachelor's degrees in English/communications and religious studies from Cabrini College in Radnor, Pa., in 2001. She graduated from St. Joseph School in 1993 and Monsignor Donovan High School four years later.

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She lives in Galloway Township with her husband and their three children, Thomas, 5; Matthew, 2; and newborn Daniel.

Ellen Briant Reilly, 30, began her teaching career in the second-grade classroom at St. Aloysius School in Jackson. She now she teaches at St. Joseph School.

"I've finally come home," she said with a smile.

She graduated from St. Joseph School in 1995 and Monsignor Donovan High School in 1999. She earned a bachelors' degree in early childhood and elementary education and minored in religious studies at Cabrini College in 2003. She and her husband live in Toms River.

"Teaching has always been my passion, and Catholic education is where my heart is," Reilly said. "I believe in the value of educating the whole child, his character and faith. It adds an extra element to be able to instill my faith in them."

Susan Briant, 26, has taught the fifth-graders at St. Dominic School in Brick for four years.

She emphasized the importance of Catholic education as a building block in the spiritual lives of her students. "It gives me the opportunity to pass along the faith with the children and give them the values I was taught to set them on a good path in life," she said.

"It's tough out there right now for them," she admitted. "We have them six and a half hours per day, and we have the responsibility to guide them. We play a major role."

Susan, who also lives in Toms River, earned bachelor's degrees in elementary education, special education and physical education from the College of St. Elizabeth in Morristown in 2007. She graduated from St. Joseph School in 1999 and Monsignor Donovan High School in 2003.

Katelyn Briant, 23, is a first-year teacher of Spanish at St. Paul School in Princeton. She graduated in

2011 from Immaculata University in Immaculata, Pa., with a bachelor's degree in English and secondary education. She minored in Spanish. She lives in Toms River, too.

Katelyn graduated from St. Joseph School in 2003 and Monsignor Donovan High School in 2007.

Like her sisters, she believes in the lasting value of a Catholic education. "It's a part of my upbringing, what I always knew, and what I am comfortable with," she stated. "Working at a Catholic school allows me to speak about my faith and use it in my lesson plans; I wouldn't be able to do that in a public school."

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