

Aquinas Welcomes FIRST LADY



First Lady receives Aquinas jacket as souvenir. Charlene Cruz (l.), Student Council President last year. Maudina Gumbs 2002. (center)

You might have thought "What could top this?" when Aquinas appeared on the cover of U.S. News & World Report's issue on outstanding schools, or when the Blue Ribbon of Excellence was awarded to Aquinas for the second time. But just imagine being a student in the Aquinas auditorium when Sr. Margaret

Ryan walked to the podium and said "Please rise and greet the First Lady of the United States of America!"

It was a thrilling day, a historic moment, not just for Aquinas but for Catholic education. Following the tragedy of September 11, a letter from the First Lady to students throughout the country had prompted then Aquinas Student Council president, Charlene Cruz, to invite Mrs. Bush to come in person. Time went by, and the possibility grew remote. But, as the first anniversary of 9/11 drew near, Aquinas was notified that a visit would take place while the President and First Lady were in New York for ceremonies at Ground Zero.

Planning was quietly begun, but the visit could not be made public until the day before it occurred. A large-group gathering in the auditorium would be followed by a dialogue of Mrs. Bush with a group of 20 students in the library. Finally, all was in readiness, and anticipation changed to reality as Nichelle Broderick 2002 led the opening prayer. Sr. Margaret Ryan warmly welcomed the First Lady, "...when you come into our school, you come into our hearts."

As Sr. Catherine Rose Quigley presented to Mrs. Bush the symbol, a torch, received by the teachers at the beginning of this school year, she said, "Torches light the future and pass along: hope, imagination, efficacy, respect, and connectedness." The First Lady's response was greeted with a resounding standing ovation: "This crowd that I am looking at gives me hope. We have talked about the tremendous responsibility to help America

heal, and you students have responded. You have lived the lessons of your patron Saint Thomas Aquinas - prayer and action. You show the world the best of human nature. God bless you and God Bless America."

**Student Address
by Aileen Tejada 2003**

September 11th is forever etched in the hearts and souls of all Americans. The sound of the bagpipes, the sorrow reflected in the faces of children, the broken hearts of spouses are daily reminders of the senseless destruction and loss of lives of the innocent.

Our first reaction to the attacks was shock and fear for our country and ourselves. Who of our family and friends might be there? As the victims became known, sadness touched everyone. As this Aquinas High School community, we prayed; we read your letter, Mrs. Bush, and we were comforted by your words; in our classes, we asked questions; and in our city a new sense of unity emerged. All cultures and races were one in sorrow, as we visited Ground Zero.

I believe many of us have been led to think more about the gift of life. The life of each one of us is indeed a precious gift from God, an opportunity to give of ourselves, to do our best, respect one another, to value the freedom we enjoy as citizens of the United States of America in our quest for world peace.

Today, Mrs. Bush, you have given us another opportunity to publicly affirm our hope in the future. Our faith and our belief in our country is the glue that holds us together. We need to understand other faiths and cultures, so that all may work together for a better world. Thank you for showing us how to reach out. Though September 11 remains with us as a day of tragedy, you have given us September 12 as a day to remember, a day of joy, the day the First Lady of the United States of America visited the best high school in the world.