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**Gwynedd Mercy Academy
High School's L.E.A.D.
program** gives girls the tools
they need to gain confidence,
find their voices, and become
tomorrow's leaders.
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Ready to LEAD

Jennifer Cervone Guarnaccia's connection to Gwynedd Mercy Academy High School began long before she stepped on campus for the first time. She recalls when she was in grade school and formed a friendship with a Sister of Mercy who "taught me about the history of Mercy, which inspired me socially, spiritually, and professionally," she says. "When it came time to look at high schools, she told me, 'You're going to Gwynedd Mercy.' Lo and behold, it truly was a perfect match."

After graduating from Gwynedd Mercy in 1993, Guarnaccia matriculated to St. Joseph's University. The lessons she learned in high school guided her way through college and into the working world.

"I found my confidence and my voice while at Gwynedd," she says. "Everyone gave me so much support while I was a student; it was so warm and positive. I may not have fully realized it at the time, but my experience at Gwynedd taught me how to be a leader."

Now she is returning the favor. After 16 years as an entrepreneur and business owner in the healthcare sector, Guarnaccia returned to her alma mater to oversee the school's Leadership Initiatives through a program known, fittingly, as L.E.A.D. (Learn, Educate, Achieve, Develop). Leadership emerged as one of five priority areas during development of Gwynedd Mercy's five-year strategic plan, which was unveiled in the spring of 2019. The strategic plan resulted in five pillars that included education (mind, body, and spirit), leadership, wellness, connection, and vitality, and was led by President Denise Corkery Marbach '72, a career businesswoman and fellow alumna, who became the school's first lay leader in 2017.

"Educating, inspiring, and empowering women has always been part of our culture and Mercy roots, but now we're more intentional and purposeful in what we deliver and how we deliver it," Guarnaccia adds. "Our girls need to be prepared to lead when they leave these halls, and they are better prepared for today's world and challenges."

Gwynedd Mercy had a clear mission in mind as it prepared for the 2019 launch of L.E.A.D.: "to educate and empower young women to become ethical, courageous leaders

of action and conviction." In addition to gathering feedback from engaged students, Guarnaccia assembled a Leadership Committee of seven women—alumnae who have risen to prominence in fields such as health care, communications, law, and nonprofit management—to help bring the program to life.

Nearly 70 Gwynedd Mercy students participated in L.E.A.D. last year, and the program has since grown to include several interwoven elements:

Leadership Certification. Gwynedd Mercy students can become leadership certified through the Lead4Change Student Leadership Program. The 12-lesson curriculum is designed to integrate leadership training, collaboration, and community service into the classroom as a way to effect change. Student teams enrolled in the program must complete a service project that centers on an issue of importance in the community or the school,

Gwynedd Mercy Academy High School's L.E.A.D. program gives girls the tools they need to gain confidence, find their voices, and become tomorrow's leaders.

by BILL DONAHUE photography by JODY ROBINSON



Students in the L.E.A.D. program decorate the school in celebration of International Day of the Girl.

and then present their business plan to faculty members including President Marbach and Principal Mary E. Kirby; Guarnaccia likens it to “the Mercy version of *Shark Tank*.” All students who get certified through the program are then invited to apply for the Student Leadership Council, which helps to educate the student body on professional development.

Guarnaccia considers Gwynedd Mercy’s first year in the Lead4Change program a great success. Four students won Lead4Change grants and qualified for the national competition—the only all-girls school teams to win. Ideas that grew out of the program include a daylong conference focused on student leadership, and a series of townhall meetings known as Mercy Speaks, designed to raise awareness of mental health and other pressing issues that affect teens and women.

A Culture of Leadership. As program leader, Guarnaccia works with students throughout the school, including captains of clubs and sports teams about what it takes to be an effective leader. Also, in addition to Lead4Change, Gwynedd Mercy has forged bonds with other national and international organizations devoted to promoting gender equality, diversity, and inclusion—namely, the Mercy Education System of the Americas, the National Coalition of Girls’ Schools, IGNITE National, and Girl Up. These affiliations lend vital educational resources and assist in the development of leadership opportunities for Gwynedd Mercy students.

Student Internships and Externships. Gwynedd Mercy’s internships enable students to gain immersive, real-world experience in a dozen professions including technology, engineering, marketing communications, business, and the culinary arts without having to leave campus. Likewise, the school’s externship program helps students gain an understanding of what it’s like to work in careers they may be considering. Despite the pandemic, externship participants have been able to watch a brain surgery being performed at Lenox Hill Hospital, sit in on Senate hearings in Harrisburg, and shadow an orthodontist while wearing full-body personal protective equipment.

Student Leadership Conference. Every August, Gwynedd invites club leaders and rising seniors to a daylong leadership conference designed to inspire and support students’ “voices and visions” for the future. In addition to sessions focused on teambuilding, interviewing, and resumé creation, the conference features inspiring guest speakers such as Brandi M. Baldwin, Ph.D., or “Dr. Brandi,” a sought-after expert in the areas of leadership, diversity, and inclusion.

Gwynedd Force Networking Platform. A private professional networking platform for all connected to the school, Gwynedd Force fosters the sisterhood and networking among Gwynedd alumnae as well as parents. Current students also use GwyneddForce.com to

seek mentors, for example, or pose career-related questions to alumnae who are established in fields in which they may have an interest.

Vision2020Votes. Gwynedd Mercy welcomes the entire student body to participate in this national, nonpartisan effort to get more women registered and voting in the 2020 election. Students of voting age are incited to vote for the first time, while those who are under 18 are encouraged to invite other females of voting age to vote in the upcoming election.

The L.E.A.D. program continues to evolve, according to Guarnaccia, thanks in part to sizable grants from the EE Ford Foundation, the Lead4Change Foundation, and the charitable arm of BLB&B Advisors. Forthcoming initiatives include getting the entire sophomore class Lead4Change-certified this spring, thereby achieving school certification, so they can execute their vision in junior year and present it as their senior project; expanding the Gwynedd Summit, a summer program offering leadership training to sixth, seventh, and eighth graders from surrounding communities; building out the Student Leadership Conference; and sending a select number of faculty members to the Gardner Carney Leadership Institute, and then using their learnings to craft leadership workshops for Gwynedd faculty and staff.

“Mercy Foundress Catherine McAuley inspires and challenges us to do good today and do better tomorrow,” Guarnaccia adds. “The L.E.A.D. program allows our girls the freedom to explore, provides opportunities to learn, and shows them how to tackle challenges that are not easy. This kind of education teaches girls to develop grit and resiliency.”

She believes L.E.A.D. will further the trend of Gwynedd alumnae returning to campus and sharing their expertise with future generations, just like she did. She cites recent correspondence with a 2020 graduate who was among the first 67 students to complete the L.E.A.D. program.

“She’s now majoring in business and minoring in leadership at High Point University in North Carolina,” Guarnaccia says. “Not only does she want to join the L.E.A.D. professional council, but she wants to come back and teach our students. I take that as a great compliment. It reinforces that we are living up to the Gwynedd Mercy ethos of ‘She is the future.’ Knowing that our future will be led by Mercy women gives me great hope.” ■



Jennifer Cervone Guarnaccia '93 oversees Leadership Initiatives at Gwynedd Mercy.



L.E.A.D.'s mission is “to educate and empower young women to become ethical, courageous leaders of action and conviction.”

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