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Hand-stenciled signs on a campus telephone pole honor graduating seniors at San Marcos Baptist Academy. Arman Rupani of Flower Mound (right) conducts an experiment in a science lab.

## **San Marcos Academy takes students full-speed ahead**

**By Craig Bird**

*Special to the Standard*

SAN MARCOS-At first glance, the signs don't seem to share anything except proximity.

The standard-issue, permanent "Speed Limit 35" notice sits a few yards inside the entrance. Close behind it, nailed to a telephone pole are

individual, temporary, hand-stenciled boards: Class of '03, Renee, Justine, Collins, Reed, Kristina, Dale, Anjuli, Claudia T., Bev, Cody and Tory. Along the road, other telephone poles sprout from the ground bearing more names-and other traffic restrictions.



Senior Brady Mitchell says the academy has helped her fulfill her dream of attending Baylor University.

Separately, the signs' messages are clear. But together they provide symbolic bookends to the ongoing story of San Marcos Baptist Academy, one of the few military boarding schools in Texas and one of the lesser-known ministries of the Baptist General Convention of Texas.

Texas Baptists support the academy through gifts to the BGCT Cooperative Program.

Make no mistake: The Academy, with a coed enrollment of about 250, is a place of structure and rules, of responsibility and accountability. Each student is graded and ranked weekly on a two-tiered system that considers both academic standing and behavior. Privileges are directly related to the scores.

The tightly run program is geared to help students recognize and reach their potential intellectually, physically and spiritually.

"We celebrate the fact that 97 percent of our graduates go on to attend college. That is an enviable academic achievement," said President Victor Schmidt. "But more importantly, we also strive to prepare our students for life by surrounding them with a community fully committed to values based on Jesus Christ. This is a mission field, and Texas Baptist are helping change lives."

Lives like Jorge Ayala and Brady Mitchell, Claudia Tijerina and Ryan Gaspard and Anjuli Kamins. All names on those telephone poles.



Returning students Ashley Dunn of Gainesville, Claudia Diaz of Sugar Land and Danielle Madsen of Richmond celebrated the start of school last fall.

Ayala, a 17-year-old junior, is a newcomer, arriving at the school last January, the most recent stop on a traumatic, four-year tour of boarding schools and rebellion. He thinks this will be his final stop.

"When I was about 13, I started fighting with my dad all the time," he explained. "My parents sent me to several of the best boarding schools in

Mexico, and even to Canada for a year, but I just didn't have the strength on my own to be self-disciplined. I wound up partying all the time."

Finally, a family friend who lives in Houston suggested San Marcos Academy. There, Ayala has found the academic attention and structure he was looking for-and a faith experience he had not expected.

"I went to church in Mexico sometimes, but it didn't mean anything," he said. "Here, I feel the presence of God with me. Mr. (Craig) Paul (the campus pastor) really supported me and answered my questions, and my roommate showed me how to live a Christian life. I was saved two months after I got here. My parents are really impressed.

"I've learned the Bible can help me make good decisions. This summer, I'll go home for two months. It will be my last chance to prove that I've really changed."

Mitchell grew up in the Dallas area with two dreams-to go to boarding school and to attend Baylor University. Doing the first made the second possible.

"In the seventh grade, I got this idea I wanted to go to boarding school, and my parents said I could for my ninth grade," she said. "Then when I got here, I cried and cried and cried, I was so homesick. But my parents made me stick it out. And I'm really glad. The past three years have been great, with so much to do and so many friends.



Senior members of the Reserve Officer Training Corps celebrated the end of the year by wearing civilian clothes to morning assembly.

“Plus my grades are high enough I was accepted by Baylor,” Mitchell continued. “It's almost impossible to fail here academically—not because it's easy. It's very hard, but the teachers here are all overqualified for what they teach. Plus, in addition to mandatory tutorials if your grades aren't good enough, the teachers come out here on their own time in the evenings and weekends to give you as much help as you need. They refuse to let us not learn.”

Tijerina, among the 20 percent of students who do not live on campus, was drawn by the international outlook of both the classroom and the student body. The academy draws students from Asian countries as well as South and Central America, Mexico and the Middle East.

Previously, “school just wasn't very academically challenging, and we weren't exposed to world issues,” she explained. “The teachers here not only do a great job teaching, but they show you how to apply what you've learned. And all the students from other countries really enrich the intellectual mix.”

The worldwide outlook will be valuable, Tijerina believes, not only when

she moves on to Baylor but as she answers a call to full-time Christian vocation.

"I went to Germany last summer on a mission trip, and I'm going back there again this summer," she said. "I think that may be where God wants me as a career missionary."

There would seem to be a logical connection between Gaspard's profession of faith in Christ at summer church camp and his enrollment at the academy in the fall. But there wasn't.



2002 seniors Sophia Troxell of Wimberley and Mary Claire Ledoux, Lindsey Burnett, Sarah Dillon and Nicole McClusky of San Marcos celebrated commencement.

"I had mono my sophomore year (in Rockwall) and got way behind in school," he explained. "My aunt was surfing the Internet when she found this school. We had never heard of it. I came here for a better academic

opportunity. If I hadn't, I don't think I would have gotten into college."

Gaspard is headed to Texas A&M-Commerce with hopes of transferring to Texas A&M-College Station later.

His new faith commitment led him to apply for the chaplain's slot in his ROTC corps. "I didn't know what I was getting into," he admitted. "We have Buddhists and Muslims in the corps, and it was hard to overcome some of the barriers. But it helped me learn what I really believe and why I believe it."

Now he plans to join the military, aiming to be an airborne chaplain.

An American couple's conversion to Hinduism led, indirectly, to Kamins' enrollment at the academy.

"My parents came to India as part of their process in becoming Hindus," she said. "They adopted me when I was a few months old and brought me back to Seattle."

The family moved to Austin four years ago, but the young teenager was figuring out she needed both intensive academics and firm structure. She got the first at a private day school, "but I couldn't handle all the freedom my parents gave me," she said.

She looked in the yellow pages for a boarding school and found the academy. It has proved all she hoped for-and more.

"I love crowds, and it is great to always have a group of girls to talk to at the dorm," she explained. "The teachers pushed me hard but helped me every step of the way."

She also started paying attention to what was said in chapel and how the teachers and staff and many of the students lived up to the devotions.

"There were Christians all around me, and I found I enjoyed that environment," she said. "I started to ask, 'Why the difference?' Eventually I realized Christianity is world-embracing rather than self-serving. I wanted to live like that.

"My dad is OK with it (being a Christian), if it's what I want. But my stepmother thinks I'm just going through a phase. But this is real. I am a Christian."

The 30-member staff at San Marcos Academy is remarkable not only for devotion but also for longevity. Two teachers are 35-year veterans, and two others have passed the 25-year mark. Many staff are former students or the children of former students or staff.

"I have no doubt that all our people are here because they are called to this ministry," Schmidt insisted. "None of them are paid what they are worth, but they love these kids so deeply and do a magnificent job."

The staff agrees.

Byron Robinson, one of the 35-yearers, has a Ph.D. in reading and turned down a faculty position at the University of Mississippi to stay at San Marcos and teach English and math. He also coached the offensive line on the football team and coached track for 27 years until health problems made him drop that two years ago.

"This is a special place," he said. "It allows us to establish close relationships with both the students and their parents. I hope my granddaughter gets to go to school here."



The San Marcos Baptist Academy senior class of 2003 celebrated homecoming with a bonfire.

Jorge Ayala says the academy changed his life.

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