

MARY IMMACULATE CATHOLIC SCHOOL

# Student walks in stride with God by his side

Story by David Sedeño  
Photos by Jenna Teter  
The Texas Catholic

FARMERS BRANCH—Ask Zach Thibodeaux's friends and teachers to describe him and they'll say that the fourth-grader at Mary Immaculate Catholic School is something like this:

Cool. Calm. Collected.  
Ask his mother and you will hear this:  
Confident. Competitive. Very Catholic.

The 10-year-old has exhibited all of those Cs in his journey that has been chronicled in *The Texas Catholic* and *The Dallas Morning News*. Zach Thibodeaux has cone-rod dystrophy and one day, he will go blind.

For now, the blurry images have not stopped him from tackling his disease. Nor has it stopped Mary Immaculate Catholic School from looking for ways to educate and accommodate him in the classroom. Nor has it stopped his parents from committing themselves to doing all that they can do to ensure that Zach will remain at Mary Immaculate and someday will follow in his brother's footsteps and attend a Catholic high school.



Zach Thibodeaux follows along with his teacher and classmates using a special Braille textbook. He then uses a Braille typewriter to complete his work.

Zach has been at Mary Immaculate since kindergarten. It has been his school, his church, his life.

When doctors told them about Zach's disease a couple of years ago, there was no question that he would remain at Mary Immaculate.

"It's not just about school," his mother, Johanna Uek said. "It's about your faith. It's about what difference you are going to make in the world. It's about the whole person. I was raised Catholic and it has been my saving gracing

throughout my life and because of that putting him in a Catholic school was more important than putting him in a public school.

The school has held a fundraiser that benefitted Zach and students, parents, teachers and staff have been supportive of the family. In his fourth-grade classroom, Zach sits in the back corner of the room. Instead of a desk, he has a slightly bigger table to accommodate his Braille books and his machine. Behind him on the wall is bookcase for those books.

He has the same lesson plan and

materials that other students do; it just takes him longer to finish some of his work on the Braille writer.

Principal Matt Krause said that Zach has been an inspiration to the school and church community and that he has a home at Mary Immaculate for years to come.

"Zach is just a wonderful young man," said Principal Matt Krause, who added that Zach probably knows his way around the school better than him. "As far as the curriculum, we don't need to adjust. It may take him a little longer to do some things because he has to write on the machine, but he is a bright kid and if we need to adjust, then we'll just do it."

Last year, Zach told his classmates about his disease during what could be best described as a "show-and-tell" period organized by his homeroom teacher, Carey Murawski. As dozens of students gathered assembly-style in the auditorium, Zach talked about his disease. On a big screen, he showed them images of what he could see and couldn't see. Basically, there was a black spot in the middle of his frame.

The students also heard from a blind woman who brought along her four-legged companion. The students later put on blindfolds and

rotated through various task stations to experience what Zach would someday have to tackle on a daily basis: filling a glass with water; counting coins; making a peanut butter and jelly sandwich; walking with a cane while navigating obstacles; and trying their hand on the abacus and Braille writer.

Through it all, Zach went from table to table and smiled.

"That was huge. He felt really confident," Uek said. "When he saw his friends go through that, he knew that they understood. It made them more compassionate and they could relate and he didn't feel so alone and left out."

And Zach has been able to talk to Father Michael Forge, the pastor at Mary Immaculate Catholic Church, about God, the disease that is afflicting him and what God has planned for him.

"Zachary is losing his sight," his mother said, "but why would I want him to lose his friends and the place where he learned his faith? This is the place where he is learning about God and can talk to the priest about why is God doing this. He could never do that in a public school, so I could never take him away from this environment."

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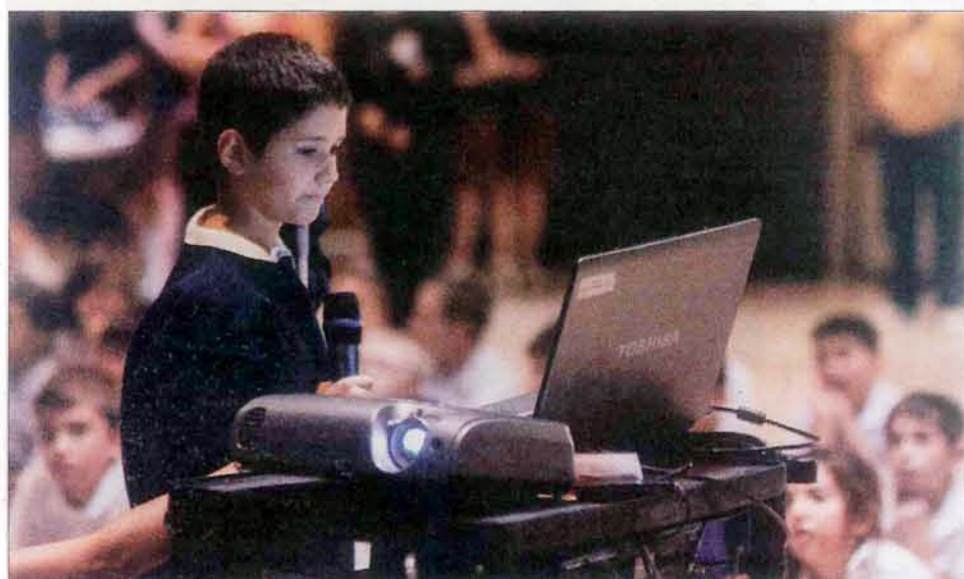


Mary Immaculate Catholic School

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Zach Thibodeaux talks with classmates during a special assembly at Mary Immaculate Catholic School in Farmers Branch.



Zach Thibodeaux presents a slideshow presentation to his classmates about his eye condition and how he manages during a special assembly at Mary Immaculate Catholic Church in Farmers Branch.

