

When Some First Friends Become Forever Friends

Eighteen years ago, three eager third graders walked through the doors of All Saints Academy Elementary. One remembers being excited. What would this new school be like? Another remembers being nervous at the thought of meeting new people but also feeling a certain amount of comfort already knowing some of the students who would be in her class. The third recollects walking into a building she had never seen while realizing she knew absolutely no one at all.

So what eventually drew these three All Saints Academy alumni to one another?

Clare Anderson, currently living in Bardstown, Kentucky, where she is a lab technician in the quality lab at Barton 1792's Distillery recalls becoming friends with a larger group of students. Slowly, she gravitated towards those with whom she got along best. Among those friends were Brianne Robach and Maya Zimelis.

Looking back, Brianne specifically recalls Clare, Maya, and she being different but alike. Now a kindergarten teacher at St. Anthony's School here in Grand Rapids, Brianne remembers feeling that they just understood each other and enjoyed one another's company.

Knowing no one at the time, Maya

reminisces Brianne and Clare being among the kindest in the class.

"They always included others and made everyone feel good. That's powerful." That early lesson is one Maya keeps close and strives to put to use daily in her classroom of pre-schoolers at GRCC's Early Childhood Learning Lab.

During their middle years, sleepovers filled with trending challenges, board games, and music video making kept them close. Sports was another constant. And after eighth grade, Clare headed off to West Catholic; Brianne and Maya went to Catholic Central. Other interests developed which brought new friends, but the three reconnected a few times a year. When together, they felt that nothing really changed between them and getting together never felt awkward.

Next, college. Clare knew she was ready to venture further away from home. The second she stepped on campus at Loyola University in Chicago, she knew it was the right choice for her. She majored in chemistry and minored in Spanish.

Education and mathematics at Aquinas College was Brianne's choice. She selected Aquinas because of its small class sizes, Catholicity, and the "cute" campus. It felt like another home. Currently she loves teaching children about God and watching them grow

throughout the year. "The impact teachers have on the lives of their students is greater than people know. Feeling the love of the students and the community is very reassuring that I am doing something right."

Studying education, specifically early childhood education, drew Maya to GRCC. She believes early childhood's Foundation Stage (ages 3-5) of development is critical. Like Brianne, Maya loves seeing her students grow and really enjoys being a part of important developmental milestones.

Considering they were both in town, Brianne and Maya continued to connect during the college years to rollerblade, catch a movie, or try a new craft. They always looked forward to receiving a text from Clare, letting them know she was making a visit home. The three of them catching up over a meal was always prioritized.

In their mid-twenties, this trio continues to put time and energy into their relationship. And with good reason. "I admire that Brianne and Maya knew (and know) they want to be in education, and I can really see that is where they both belong, shaping future generations. I also admire they both know exactly who they are," Clare shared. "There is just so much understanding, respect, and memories that we all share. I feel



like I can tell either of them anything without any judgement since they have known me through pretty much every stage of life.”

Brianne can also name admirable traits of her friends. “Clare’s boldness and sense of adventure... she has always been one to try new things, never letting anyone get her down or stop her. And Maya, I admire her passion. When we talk about things she feels strongly about like dance or teaching, she will have and share opinions on the topics. I’m so glad that we have always made the effort to keep in touch, whether it be a couple times a year or month. We have always cared enough to reach out. Even the simple Happy Birthday to each other always lets us know that we are thinking about one another.”

Maya’s thoughts are similar. “I admire how strong they both are, both having their own battles but not letting them stop them from

achieving their goals. That resonates with me. I admire how genuinely kind they both are. Even from a young age they just included others.

Looking ahead, Clare would like to And they are both so strong I am thankful we have a friendship that can weather time and distance. When we see each other, we click again instantly.”

Looking ahead, Clare would like to further her career by learning more about the various aspects of her industry including the different standards that need to be met. Brianne plans to eventually teach math in the older grades. She’d like to show students the importance of math in their lives while also making it fun. Maya has fallen in love with the play based learning environment in which she teaches, the challenge of creating said environment in which the learning takes place, and the assessments which document the growth in her

students. She looks forward to future professional development in which she can learn more.

A trip to Kentucky to spend a long weekend with Clare is a recent highlight of this group of grade school friends. Come spring, Clare and Maya will be bridesmaids when Brianne walks down the aisle. And after that? They all agree planning a girls’ trip out of state is on the short list.

Maya summed it all up by voicing they just liked to go new places and try new things together.

Clare, true to her adventurous nature, shared one final thought. “I think it would be cool to just pick a random destination and go.” further her career by learning more about the various aspects of her industry including the different standards that need to be met. Brianne plans to eventually move