

Denise Amato
Sister Lucille Socciarelli/Father John Sturm
Making a Difference Award

In 2001, the late Tim Russert established the Sister Lucille Socciarelli/Father John Sturm Making a Difference Award to honor a teacher in a Diocese of Buffalo Catholic schools whose extraordinary dedication is truly *making a difference* in the lives of his or her students. This annual award serves as a “*constant reminder of the deep social concern and high standards and values that were exemplified by my former teachers, Sister Mary Lucille Socciarelli, RSM, and Father John Sturm, SJ,*” both of whom had a profound impact on Russert’s life at St. Bonaventure School in West Seneca and at Canisius High School.

Tim, host of NBC’s “Meet the Press” until his untimely death in 2008, personally funded the award each year. His tragic passing prompted an amazing outpouring of generosity from his many friends and admirers. Thus, the Timothy J. Russert Making a Difference Endowment Fund has been created in Tim’s honor to continue his commitment to Catholic school teachers.

This year’s recipient of the Making a Difference Award is Denise Amato, teacher of Religion for grades 6 – 8, and Spanish for grades 1 - 5 at SS. Peter & Paul School in Williamsville.

Denise follows the example with which she was raised. The energy and enthusiasm she brings to the classroom come from her own experiences as a student of Catholic education. As a teacher Denise engages her students with the same creativity she saw in the Felician Sisters who taught her in her hometown of Claremont, California. “I was deeply influenced by my teachers in grade school and junior high...They had such a loving way of teaching it was from that time on, in seventh and eighth grade, that I wanted to be a teacher. In her classroom, Denise’s students pray, they question, they discover, they learn.”

Denise not only teaches in the classroom. She also coordinates many of the sixth, seventh & eighth grade Masses, held every Wednesday, along with three para liturgies a year. “These are creative endeavors where you bring Jesus into a unique way of presenting a religious topic,” Denise said of these liturgies. One such liturgy had the eighth graders taking commercials and rewriting them to center on faith and Jesus. Other themes have included American Idol with the students acting a judges and contestants. “It has to be about faith.”

Marianne Maines nominated Denise for this award for the way she works with the students. “She treats every student with dignity; she’s gentle, she’s kind, she’s faith-filled. She’s passionate about teaching the gospel. She is a role model of Catholic values to her students.”

Beyond the classroom Denise spearheads other endeavors such as the “Blanket Project” for veterans. Her seventh graders met after school and on Saturdays to make fleece blankets for veterans, then delivering them to the V.A. Medical Center. “It was priceless to see their faces soaking in the stories of the veterans, and the veterans getting excited that such young people were interested in listening to them. It was a wonderful experience.”

For her love of God, her students and teaching, and for her many ways of bringing faith into the classroom, and on behalf of the late Tim Russert, the Roman Catholic Diocese of Buffalo was proud to present the 2010 Sister Lucille Socciarelli/Fr. John Sturm Making a Difference Award to Miss Denise Amato.