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Olympic swimming champion Katie Ledecky, center, visits her alma mater, Stone Ridge School of the Sacred Heart in Bethesda, Md., on Oct. 22 and listens as second grader Anna Reilly at right asks her a question. The other students from left to right are fourth grader Annie Siciliano, third grader Lilly Bracewell, first grader Amelia Farrell and kindergartener Bowen Wiegmann. (OSV News/Catholic Standard/Mihoko Owada)

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For Olympic champion swimmer Katie Ledecky, one of the best things about winning Olympic medals is sharing them.

Now the most decorated U.S. female Olympian in history, Ledecky paid a visit Oct. 22 to her high school alma mater, Stone Ridge School of the Sacred Heart in Bethesda, to show students her medals and to talk about her Olympic experiences. She also stopped by her home parish, the Church of the Little Flower in Bethesda.

Addressing Stone Ridge students in the school's theater, Ledecky described what it was like after winning her first gold medal in swimming at the 2012 Summer Olympics in London, when she was 15 and a rising sophomore at the school.

She returned home and showed her medal to wounded warriors at the Walter Reed National Military Medical Center in Bethesda, and she also visited the National Children's Hospital in Washington, and she remembered putting a medal around a child's neck there and seeing that child's face light up.

"That's probably my favorite part about winning the medals, and that's probably what really inspires me the most, to try to win those medals and to be able to share them," the Olympian said.

Ledecky, who wore her four latest Olympic medals around her neck as she addressed the Stone Ridge students, added, "To me, these medals are not just mine. They're everyone's, everyone that has supported me, everyone that has driven me to practice, pushed me in practice, taught me in school, supported me in all my goals, and even just everyone at home watching on TV and yelling at their TV."

In Paris while swimming in her fourth consecutive Summer Olympics, Ledecky won her 14th Olympic medal, adding two more gold medals to her record-setting total of nine gold medals, and she became the most decorated U.S. female Olympian in history.

At the Paris Olympics, Ledecky won gold medals in her signature races — the women's 800-meter and 1500-meter freestyle events — and she won a silver medal in the 4x200 meter freestyle relay and a bronze in the 400-meter women's freestyle race.

This summer before the Olympics, her best-selling memoir, *Just Add Water*, was published by Simon & Schuster. In May at the White House, President Joe Biden presented Ledecky with the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the nation's highest civilian honor.

Five days before speaking to Stone Ridge students, Ledecky was honored at a ceremony on campus, where members of the Montgomery County Council issued a proclamation naming Oct. 17 as "Katie Ledecky Day," and an honorary road marker, "Katie Ledecky Lane" was unveiled for a roadway along the school.

Speaking to students during Ledecky's visit, Catherine Ronan Karrels — head of school at Stone Ridge — said of the new road sign, "Now every day when we drive to school, we will be able to see that and be inspired by her as we come and go about our day."

Ledecky, class of 2015, gave credit to the Stone Ridge community for its support, and for helping her find balance in her life from when she first returned to school in 2012 as an Olympian.

"What was so great was I was able to just get right back to work, get back to school. All my teachers treated me just like any other student, all my classmates treated me like I was just another student," she said.

Stone Ridge School of the Sacred Heart is sponsored by the Society of the Sacred Heart.

Before the Paris Olympics, Stone Ridge held a pep rally for Ledecky and two other alumnae who were swimming in those games — Phoebe Bacon of the class of 2020 and Erin Gemmell of the class of 2023.

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Gemmell joined Ledecky in winning a silver medal in the 4x200 meter freestyle relay, and Bacon finished in fourth place in the 200-meter backstroke race, narrowly missing a bronze medal by .04 seconds.

Ledecky said she appreciated how during her years at Stone Ridge, the community supported her in her swimming journey and her academic journey.

"Education has always been a top priority in my life, it's been a value in my family," she said. "I never wanted to push my education aside for the sake of swimming. I always wanted to balance both of them. Stone Ridge and everyone in this community allowed me to do that, supported me in that, pushed me in school and in my sport."

After graduating from Stone Ridge, Ledecky earned a degree in psychology from Stanford University.

The Olympian said another aspect of her Stone Ridge education that she appreciated was the Upper School's Social Action Program. On one Wednesday each month, Stone Ridge Upper School students participate in a day of community service. When she was at Stone Ridge, Ledecky volunteered with Bikes for the World, which provides donated bicycles to people in developing countries.

"I loved to be able to get out and help other people. ... It's so great to learn how to give back to your community," she said.

The athlete, who is now 27, said she started swimming when she was 6 years old, and she loved swimming from the start.

The athlete said she has always set goals for herself. "I set my mind on something I want to achieve, whether that was in the classroom or whether that was in the pool,

and I'd just go do it, do whatever it took to get those goals," she said.

Describing the work involved in her training, Ledecky said she swims 10 times a week, and she added that she swims about two hours each time, and sometimes adds another swimming session on Sundays. One little girl emphatically asked Ledecky if she ever gets tired of swimming, and the Olympian responded, "I really love it!"

Ledecky is now training to compete in the 2028 Summer Olympics in Los Angeles.

The Olympian offered words of encouragement to all the students. "If there's something that you do find that you love as much as I have found that with swimming, you've got to try to pursue it to the fullest and try to be the very best that you can be at it." That might be a school subject, a sport or an extracurricular activity, she said.

Standing beside the pool at the Stone Ridge Aquatics Center, Ledecky was interviewed by journalists after her remarks.

She said that when she's competing in the Olympics, she carries in her heart all those people from Stone Ridge and from Little Flower school and parish who have supported her. "They've all been so great and have all helped me learn how to have balance in my life," she said.

Asked if she still prays the Hail Mary before her swimming races, Ledecky said, "I still do that. I joke that it's probably more like a decade of the rosary now. Yes, I've always done that."

Ledecky said her Catholic faith remains a source of strength for her.

That faith and the support of her Catholic schools and parish help "quiet my head and quiet my heart and help me feel balance and ready and prepared and supported. ... I lean on everything I learned at Little Flower and Stone Ridge," she said.