



After receiving the Stars & Stripes Award from the American Heritage Girls, Abigail Powers acknowledges her parents, Andrea and William Powers of St. Columbkille Parish in Papillion. Abigail, 17, was honored Jan. 27 at St. Columbkille, where her troop is based. Her mother helped establish the troop in 2015. SUSAN SZALEWSKI/STAFF

 NEWS

## American Heritage Girls grows, helps shape young lives

🕒 February 12, 2021 by [Susan Szalewski](#)

When 17-year-old Abigail Powers earned a Stars & Stripes Award – the highest honor given by American Heritage Girls – it was a personal honor, a recognition for hours of work and leadership.

But it also marked a milestone for the local American Heritage Girls (AHG), a faith-based organization devoted to developing girls' characters.

Powers – honored Jan. 27 before a gathering of about 50 people at St. Columbkille Parish in Papillion, including Papillion Mayor David Black – was not only the first person in the Archdiocese of Omaha to receive the award, she was also the first Catholic in the state, the fourth Nebraskan of any faith and the 703rd person in the country to earn the recognition.

The faith aspect of the group is one of several reasons she enjoys AHG, said Powers, a St. Columbkille parishioner who is homeschooled and plans to study nursing at Creighton University next fall.

“It’s really neat to meet like-minded girls,” she said.

During the six years since the troop’s founding, the girls at St. Columbkille have worshiped at Mass together, learned about their faith, worked on service projects together and prayed a Rosary around a campfire.

Powers said the organization has helped transform her from a shy girl into a confident young woman who’s not afraid to speak publicly, and enjoys serving others and exploring new hobbies.

## **EXPANSION**

Powers and her mother, Andrea Powers, helped bring AHG to St. Columbkille, the first parish in the archdiocese to host a troop.

Since then, AHG has expanded to other parishes: St. Wenceslaus and St. Margaret Mary in Omaha and St. Patrick in Gretna.

The coronavirus pandemic has stymied some of the troops' activities, but leaders say they are hoping to provide more opportunities for girls to join AHG and grow.

Abigail joined AHG when she was in fourth grade and lived in Virginia. When her family moved to Nebraska, they looked for a troop to join and found one at a nearby Protestant church.

Andrea Powers said she had been thinking about starting a troop at St. Columbkille, but she knew she was called to do it when she heard her pastor at the time, Father Damian Zuerlein, say in a homily that God was calling him out of his comfort zone to lead another parish, St. Frances Cabrini in Omaha.

Powers said she knew then that she also was being called out of her comfort zone, that it was time to start a troop at St. Columbkille.

She worked with Father Zuerlein before his move to make that happen.

She consulted with the archdiocese and its Family Life Office, with then-Director Valerie Conzett. They were instrumental in getting AHG started at St. Columbkille and other parishes, Powers said.

Archbishop George J. Lucas gave the organization an endorsement in a 2015 letter to priests.

“I am pleased to offer support for American Heritage Girls (AHG) as a Christian organization serving young women in a manner that encourages them to follow Jesus Christ,” the archbishop wrote.

“I encourage you to learn more about American Heritage Girls and to consider establishing a troop in your parish. With the help of resources such as AHG, we can help form our young girls into faithful women of God, committed to a life of faith, service and love.”

## **FOCUS ON CHRIST, SERVICE**

Andrea Powers said AHG is a way for families to reinforce Catholic teaching. “It lifts up the faith above and beyond what you’re doing at home.”

The 50-or-so girls in St. Columbkille’s troop typically log a total of between 1,000 and 1,500 hours of service a year, Powers said.

Projects have included the one Abigail Powers worked on for her Stars & Stripes Award: revitalizing a neglected garden at the Eastern Nebraska Veteran’s Home in Bellevue. The girls worked more than 95 hours to beautify the garden which benefits the 30 residents in the home’s memory care unit.

Even though Abigail will be moving on from AHG, that spirit of service toward Church and community has been instilled in her and will remain with her, her mother said.

AHG’s focus on Christ is important, said Kara Collins, troop coordinator at St. Margaret Mary.

“Being faith-based is a huge thing for me, that sets them apart,” said Collins, a convert to the Catholic faith and a mother of seven, including daughter Sarah, a sixth-grader at St. Margaret Mary School and an AHG member.

Collins said she sees AHG less as an organization and more as an apostolate.

Like scouting organizations, AHG offers outdoor activities, such as archery, and members earn badges. But the focus on faith, and the intermingling of age groups,

makes AHG unique, Andrea Powers said.

The group still has activities geared for specific age levels. Teenage girls, for example, might learn about Christian money management. But at other times, the older members meet and work with the other girls in the troop, including those as young as 5.

## **BISHOPS' BACKING**

In 2012, AHG formed a National Catholic Committee which elected Bishop James D. Conley of Lincoln as its first episcopal moderator.

At least 10 bishops have endorsed American Heritage Girls, including Bishop Conley and Archbishop Lucas.

Across the United States, there are more than 1,000 Catholic AHG troops, more than 25% of all troops, Andrea Powers said.

Leaders must abide by a statement of faith.

Troops have chaplains and several Catholic activities and awards available for their members. But the girls don't have to belong to the host parish or even be Catholic. Abigail Powers said her troop has included non-Catholics and has always been respectful of everyone.

St. Margaret Mary has a smaller troop, with about 10 girls ages 5 to 13, and not all are members of the parish. Families might choose a troop based on meeting times that work for them, said Collins, a kindergarten teacher's aide at St. Margaret Mary.

The girls in her troop benefit from getting to know girls from other faiths, backgrounds and social circles, she said.

## PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT

Like other groups that meet at St. Margaret Mary, the AHG troop has had activities put on hold because of the coronavirus pandemic. The troop could meet through online Zoom meetings but has opted not to, Collins said.

She said she's looking forward to getting back together as a troop and doing in-person activities. "I'm hoping we can reach out and connect with the girls."

AHG relies heavily on parent involvement, Andrea Powers said, including that of fathers.

"It's definitely not a drop-off program," she said.

Although Abigail Powers is finishing her last year in AHG, she said she hopes to stay involved at St. Columbkille as a mentor, particularly for other girls working on the Stars & Stripes Award.

Her mother said she hopes to stay involved, too, perhaps working on a regional team that would be devoted to promoting and growing the number of troops.

She said she would like to see an AHG troop in every parish, or at least every other parish in the archdiocese, so every girl has an opportunity to participate.



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