



Mackenzie Vandergeest: from athlete to firefighter to paramedic



Mackenzie Vandergeest, a La Reina graduate from the Class of '00, has been a champion for excellence all of her life. These days you can find her fighting fires in the crevices of the California mountains or responding to a medical emergency through Los Angeles' crammed streets. She is a respected colleague among her fellow firefighters, working at Los Angeles County Fire Station 72 in Chatsworth. Before her days of working long hours and performing under pressure, she accumulated life's lessons and skills at La Reina High School.

Mackenzie began her La Reina career in 1994 as a seventh grader. As a baptized but inactive Catholic, she was inspired by the presence of the Sisters of Notre Dame. Recalling her first interactions with them she says, "The sisters had a strong presence there, helping me to see that faith and spirituality is real." She fondly remembers Sr. Antoinette Marie Moon, principal, as being, "warm, friendly and gentle. I always remember her to be so happy and full of life--she always led by example."

Mackenzie played varsity basketball and softball in her freshman year and continued to play throughout her school career. She was voted in 1997 as All-Ventura Team Catcher, Outstanding Offensive Player in 1998, Team MVP in 1999, and inducted into the Ventura Hall of Fame for Athletes in 2000.

After graduation Mackenzie was awarded a full tuition scholarship to the University of Arizona.

She played collegiate softball at the Division I school starting in right field, but ultimately took her place as catcher. During her time as a Wildcat, her team won the 2001 NCAA National Championship, also earning the All-Pac-10 Championship Title in 2001, 2003, and 2004. She was a member of the team that won the Women's Nationals Tournament in 2003, which was also the first All-American team at the Women's Nationals. During her intense collegiate athletic career, it was her experience at La Reina that ultimately prepared her for academic rigor. She wholeheartedly exclaims, "My study habits and ability to write essays was all from La Reina. Even as a student who struggled with learning disabilities, La Reina accommodated my needs to help me excel."

After graduating from the University of Arizona with a bachelor's degree in Physical Education, she decided to fulfill her lifelong dream of becoming a firefighter, entering the Los Angeles Fire Academy in December 2007. The Academy is a rigorous year-long process for any candidate, but as only one of two females in her graduating class, the pressure to succeed was on! As an athlete, she learned to prioritize her time, develop endurance, and bear down when faced with adversity. She recently graduated from the UCLA Center for Prehospital Care Paramedic Education Program and can now add licensed paramedic to her list of accomplishments.

Mackenzie currently uses her expertise to serve the people of Los Angeles, but she is grateful for her years at La Reina High School and the inspiration she received from the Sisters of Notre Dame. She will always have fond memories of time spent with her beloved coaches, teachers and friends.