



Jessica Waddell, the Class of 2016 valedictorian at Lutheran High School, said she was thankful that her mother, Claudia, insisted that she attend Lutheran High School, which was made possible through the Louisiana Scholarship Program. *Paul R. Dauphin*

# CHOICE VALIDATED

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**W**hen Jessica Waddell stepped to the microphone

on May 13 to give her valedictorian address to the Class of 2016 at Lutheran High School, the moment was poignant for all the usual reasons.

It was the culmination of years of extraordinary academic work, but it also was significant because of how she got to Lutheran. That's something that might never had transpired for Waddell without some help.

The opportunity for Waddell to attend a private school was made possible by the Louisiana Scholar-

ship Program. It "empowers low income families with the same opportunity as more affluent parents — the financial resources to send their child to the school of their choice," according to its webpage on the Louisiana Department of Education's website. The program began in New Orleans in 2008 and expanded statewide in 2012.

Getting a scholarship to go to Lutheran wasn't exactly what Waddell wanted at first, however.

"I fought her (mom Claudia) about it," Waddell said. "I didn't want to leave my friends. I wanted to stay with them and go to the school where they went."

When Waddell stood to deliver her valedictorian speech with her mother present, her tune had changed.

"Mama this is the best decision you've ever made," Waddell said. "Thank you for not changing your mind and insisting that I go to Lutheran High School."

In the 2015-16 school year, more than 7,100 students accepted scholarships in 119 nonpublic schools in 32 parishes. The Louisiana Federation for Children, a project of the American Federation for Children, serves as an advocate for Louisiana's school choice options and helps make parents and families aware of the opportu-



Jessica Waddell participated in a variety of extracurricular activities, including soccer, at Lutheran.

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Jessica Waddell, 2016 valedictorian at Lutheran High School, participated in many extracurricular activities including cheerleading.



Jessica Waddell was also busy outside of school, and that included volunteering at the Audubon Zoo.

## CHOICE

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nities that are available, said Paul Dauphin, director of communications for Louisiana Federation for Children.

Waddell was one of many Lutheran students who took advantage of the opportunity, Ann Duplessis, president of Louisiana Federation for Children, said. Duplessis was the speaker for Lutheran's commencement ceremony.

"Lutheran High School's Class of 2016 is one of the largest groups of Louisiana Scholarship Program participants to graduate in a single class," Duplessis said. "Both the valedictorian and salutatorian participated in the scholarship program. When they applied to

the Louisiana Scholarship Program, each of these families chose to seek a better education for their children. They considered all of the options available to them and decided that Lutheran was the best school for their children, and the success of students like Jessica validates their decision."

Waddell thrived immediately at Lutheran, participating in cheerleading, volleyball, track and soccer. But Waddell said it wasn't until her senior year that she appreciated the decision her mother had made for her four years earlier.

"I didn't realize how much I loved the school until my senior year, and I think it was because of the teachers," Waddell said. "They really cared. I had never had teachers who cared that much about me."

The respect from Waddell's teachers is

mutual.

"Jessica was the senior class president, and she did an excellent job of leading by example," said Mitzi Loughmiller, athletic director and senior sponsor. "Jessica is very organized, and she was a great liaison between students and faculty."

Katelyn Fields taught Waddell English three years at Lutheran.

"Jessica had a great desire to learn," Fields said. "She is an absolutely elegant person."

Lutheran principal Carol Christen said Waddell "caught her eye" the first week she was on the campus as a freshman.

"At first, you could tell that she didn't seem happy because she wanted to be at another school," Christen said. "She was quiet but studious. I watched her adjust and begin making

friends, and she soon became a model student and eventually began conducting tours of the school for prospective students and their parents."

In Waddell's senior year she also took English and psychology classes at UNO and volunteered at the Audubon Zoo.

Waddell plans to major in biology at the University of Louisiana-Lafayette. Her career goal is to become a veterinarian.

Regardless of what her future holds, Waddell said she will always remember that first day she walked onto the campus of Lutheran.

"I didn't want to be there, but today I'm so thankful for my mother's decision," Waddell said. "She wanted the best for me, and the four years at Lutheran High School was an incredible experience. I'm so thankful I got to experience it."