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On a mission

Immaculata star's passion for running, dentistry keeps taking her places

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Immaculata's Gabby Leo is the defending All-Catholic champion in the 1,500- and 3,000-meter events. Photo by John Hickey / Buffalo News

Gabby Leo has two passions -- distance running and becoming a dentist, and both have taken her places she could have never imagined.

As a cross country and indoor and outdoor track athlete at tiny Immaculata Academy in Hamburg, Leo has competed nationally in Greensboro, N.C., the Penn Relays, the Foot Locker Northeast Regional on Long Island and at The Armory in the Bronx.

As someone who will study dentistry in college, Leo had the rare opportunity to fly to the Dominican Republic in March and participate in a volunteer program called Jesse's Children.

Leo was introduced to the program through Drs. Elizabeth Schisa D'Angelo and Kevin D'Angelo, who share a general dentistry practice in Lackawanna.

Jesse's Children is a ministry for children in the Third World. They provide dental examinations, treatment and oral hygiene instruction. While in the Dominican, she assisted dentists as they performed restoration and extraction work to Haitian migrants who worked in the sugar cane fields.

"I came to realize if I liked it over there, I would like it [dentistry] here," said Leo. "With track and cross country and school you're always so busy. This was a timeout from all that. It was so rewarding for me helping the Haitian people."

Leo said the group she was with brought a giant duffel bag full of tennis balls to share with the Haitian children.

"They were so excited, they acted like we were handing them a million dollars," she said.

Leo has another destination in the fall. She recently signed a national letter of intent with the University at Buffalo where she will study dentistry and run cross country and track.

For more than four decades, UB's School of Dental Medicine has been a national leader in the science behind oral health.

As a runner for Immaculata, Leo is a two-time champion of All-Catholic cross country. She is the defending All-Catholic champion in track's 1,500 and 3,000. She is the All-Catholic meet record holder in both events with a 4:43.92 in the 1,500 and a 10:40 in the 3,000.

Immaculata track coach Charlie Planz came to the Class D-sized school three years ago after a 30-year teaching career at William Floyd, a Class AA school on Long Island. His impact on the track and cross country programs was immediate.

The number of girls running cross country jumped from eight to 24. The track numbers went from 20 to 43, and the school has an enrollment of only 290.

Leo has been Planz's prized pupil, and he has taken her on all of the road trips.

"If you have someone who has that kind of capability and personal drive, who wants to do things, I'm going to go the extra mile with her," he said. "She has a lot of desire and potential."

Part of that desire has been wanting to be a dentist for as long as Leo can remember. As a 5- or 6-year-old, her mother took her along on one of her dentist appointments. The dentist let Leo in the room while he worked on her mother. Leo said she was so fascinated her head was closer to her mother's mouth than the dentist.

"I feel so blessed to have been given so many opportunities these past couple years," she said. "Everything is starting to fall into place. I'm excited to see where the dentistry and running takes me."

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