*Photo by Sam Arendt*She was only a preschooler when she went to a church choir concert for the first time, but Sarah Kruske was mesmerized.

Sarah pointed to Drew Rutz, the director of music and liturgy at St. Mary's Catholic Parish in Port Washington who was playing the organ, and told her mother Sue, a choir member, that she wanted his job.

A few years later, she and her sister Michelle joined the choir.

"She doesn't pursue the keyboard anymore, so my job is safe," said Rutz, who has been Sarah's mentor and teacher since she was in first grade.

He is still somewhat in awe when Sarah, now 17 and a junior at Port Washington High School, picks up an instrument that fascinates her and plays it better than most people who have practiced it for years or when he hands out new music and Sarah instantly knows how to play it.

“I really like looking at a new piece of music and playing it for the first time,” Sarah said. “I don’t like playing it over and over. I’ll start changing it and making it different.

“Sometimes, I take music written for one instrument and play it with a different one. It sounds completely different.”

Sarah wants to major in musical performance with an emphasis on the French horn, looking at careers such as an orchestra manager or being involved in sound recording technology.

“She has considerable gifts that are just natural,” Rutz said. “She has what we call perfect pitch. I’ve known other students who had that, but no one has done in music what Sarah has done. She works very hard and sets high standards for herself.”

Sarah’s parents Sue and Tom, who are both veterinarians, recognized early on that their youngest daughter experiences the world differently than they do.

Sarah sang long before she spoke and insisted her parents, especially her mother, also sing. She learned to spell her name by playing it on a toy piano.

Her father, who’s tone deaf and claims the only thing he can play is a radio, was stunned when Sarah, who was in fourth grade at the time, came home after he took her to see “Lord of the Rings” and played the score on the piano.

Sarah said she can’t remember when she wasn’t composing melodies and songs.

In addition to having perfect pitch, Sarah experiences music in colors. Each note or chord has a distinct color that is as much a part of her perception of music as the actual sounds.

Sarah, and to a lesser degree her sister, who is studying opera at DePaul University in Chicago, have synesthesia, the ability to perceive things with two or more senses working together. Michelle sees days of the week as colors.

Perceiving numbers as colors is more common, but they can also be sensed as smells or sensations, such as tingling hands or chills down the back, Sarah said.

“When babies are born, all the sensory perceptions are connected. As they grow up, the bonds between the senses break in most people,” she explained. “We all have it to a certain degree.”

When she was in fourth grade, Sarah composed a piece for Mother’s Day. She called it “Shades of Blue” because those are the colors Sarah sees in the notes.

“It’s so beautiful. I recorded it while she played, and Drew wrote the score,” Mrs. Kruske said.

Sarah was in first grade when she and her sister joined the church and school choirs.

By second grade, Sarah was bored with the children’s choir so Rutz taught her to play the organ

and be the cantor for weekday children's Masses.

Michelle played the oboe at school, so her mother insisted Sarah play a different instrument.

Rutz had a cello her size, and Sarah fell in love with it. She since graduated to bigger, more expensive cellos.

"It's my favorite instrument because it's the one I don't compete in. I play it for me. It's very relaxing. I like to compose with it," Sarah said.

When Sarah progressed beyond what Rutz could teach her, he referred her to Jack Goodwin, a Port Washington cellist who played with the Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra until a few years ago. In addition to giving
her lessons, he introduced her to the Milwaukee Symphony Youth Orchestra.

There she met students who are as passionate about music as she is and work as hard as she does to make beautiful music.

She practices got three hours every Monday night with the group.

For her eighth-grade graduation from Port Catholic, Sarah wrote her first band composition, a lively piece named "Ta Da."

She was worried her classmates wouldn't like it, but they and their families loved it.

She's composed numerous orchestra and band arrangements since then.

Sarah has been selected five times for honors by the Wisconsin School Music Association, the first time when she was in eighth grade. She's been in the State Honors treble chorus, orchestra and band, which is
almost unheard of, Port High vocal music teacher Dennis Gephart said

If she could clone herself, Sarah would have been in all three groups most years, said Tim Wurgler, director of the honors camp program. She gets such high marks in every audition that all the directors want her, he said.

"Every year, two or three directors are fighting over her. They don't know who they're fighting over, but I do and I just smile," said Wurgler, who is a bit sad this is the last summer Sarah will be at the camp.

Gephart and band director Josh Haake encourage Sarah to explore all kinds of music.

She likes everything, but rap, she said.

One day she may play a cornetto, a curved Renaissance-era wind instrument made from pear wood, and the next day create a piece using iPads as instruments for a year-end concert by

Pandemonium, a student-led
percussion group she's been with for four years.

Her music classes and lessons are interspersed between advanced placement or honors-level classes in pre-calculus, physics and language.

The music classes soothe her, Sarah said, and enable her to concentrate better on the academics she's required to take. Her grade-point average is 4.17.

"What impresses me most of all is the sense of normalcy Sarah is able to maintain in her life," Haake said. "She has a very charismatic personality, which lends itself to a very healthy social life. Although her life is busy, she handles the stress well and is always ready with a smile."

That smile occasionally disappears, Sarah said.

"I'm a really bad teacher. I tried to help someone play the French horn, but I knew I wasn't helping. I know how I learn, but I don't know how most people learn," Sarah said.

She's also impatient with people who don't try to do their best.

"It doesn't bother me if someone can't play an instrument well if they really try hard," she said. "But I don't like it when they don't try to make the music sound good."