

School for learning disabilities celebrates first graduating class

By Emily Bloch ebloch@jacksonville.com

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When three students crossed the stage and turned their red caps' tassels from one side to the other, it meant more than just graduating from high school.

Ricardo Foster, Madison Wingerter and Anthony Rein's graduation marked a first with more to come.

On Thursday evening, the three Morning Star Catholic School students represented their school for learning disabilities' inaugural high school class.



Morning Star School students Ricardo Foster, 21, Madison Wingerter, 20, and Anthony Rein, 20, embrace Principal Jean Barnes at their graduation ceremony. The trio represent the high school for students with learning disabilities, inaugural

The Arlington school — which serves 150 students who have a learning disability, attention deficit disorders, mild intellectual disorders or are on the autism spectrum — only served students from kindergarten through eighth grade before 2017.

“By eighth grade, parents just wouldn’t know where to send their kids,” said Maria Johnson, the school’s director of development.

Both Foster and Wingerter were previous students at Morning Star for their elementary and middle school years, respectively. When the school expanded as part of a \$1.5 million high school wing, their parents signed them right up.

“I feel like that day [the high school was announced], the weight lifted off my mom’s and my shoulders,” Wingerter said. “I was so happy to have teachers that cared about me again and not just throw books and papers in my face and tell me a due date.”

According to Johnson, for the 2019-2020 school year, Morning Star expects a full class of 12 seniors to graduate.

“It’s awesome knowing there are great people here helping our kids,” said Maryann Rein, Anthony’s mom. “Now, he’s all set to go out on his own.”

All three students have plans for life after graduation.

Foster, 21, who is on the autism spectrum, secured a paid internship at The Village, an adult special-needs facility.

“I’ll be assisting people with disabilities,” Foster said. “I feel like this is my calling.”

Wingerter, 20, who has a specific learning disability, will start an entry-level position at Mayo Clinic.

Their fellow classmate, Rein, 20, who has significant processing differences, will attend Florida State College at Jacksonville next year with the goal of one day becoming a geologist.

Rein — whose face lights up at the mention of rocks, gems and fossils — said he was nervous about the graduation ceremony because of the sheer number of people there.

Morning Star’s graduation as well as other school functions throughout the year are done in conjunction with its sister school, Bishop Snyder High School.

“It gives them the chance to attend football games, prom, retreats and mass,” Johnson said. “We’re a very small school, so partnering gives students that total high school experience.”

It’s a match-up Wingerter was unsure of at first, but came to appreciate at Bishop Snyder’s annual senior retreat.

“I was very nervous because I didn’t really know anybody,” she said. “But when I went, it was the best experience. Everyone at Bishop Snyder was so nice and they treated me like I was a part of that school.”

Though it’s been a bittersweet week for the trio as they prepare to set off without each other, without Morning Star, it’s an experience none of them say they’d dare exchange.

“I’m excited but sad at the same time,” Foster said.

Rein agreed. “It’s relieving because you’ve worked so hard you want to graduate, but it’s also intimidating,” he said.