



Morning Star School Celebrates 60 Years of Success!

BY ANGELINA DEVINCENZO

FOR THE PAST 60 YEARS, Morning Star has sat as a humble, tucked away beacon of hope for families whose children have specific learning needs.

Morning Star is a Catholic, special education school owned and operated by the Diocese of St. Augustine. Fully accredited by the Florida Catholic Conference, it currently serves 108 elementary and junior high school students and their families living in Jacksonville and surrounding counties. Beginning this fall they will open a new ninth grade curriculum.

Morning Star offers an appropriate educational environment for children with specific learning disabilities; attention deficit disorders, autism spectrum disorders, and mild intellectual disabilities.

Thanks to the encouragement of Archbishop Joseph P. Hurley, Morning Star Schools were founded in Florida by the Sisters of St. Joseph in 1956. The Jacksonville campus opened its doors

in 1958 and operated as an agency of Catholic Charities Bureau. As the student population grew, the school moved to its current location in Arlington in 1963. In 2015, a Morning Star school was added to the campus of St. Patrick Interparish School in Gainesville with 12 students enrolled.

“Morning Star provides an immeasurable amount of hope for parents and it places countless students in an environment where they can be successful.”

Since its inception, the school in Jacksonville has provided parents with hope and peace of mind that their child's educational success and emotional well-being were being addressed.

Suzette Gangon, a teacher at Christ the King Catholic School, sent her son to Morning Star 15 years ago and claims it is the best decision she ever made for her child. She knew that he was getting the best education in the best

environment he could get. “It provided peace for me,” she said.

Morning Star provides an immeasurable amount of hope for parents and it places countless students in an environment where they can be successful.

“You can't really quantify a lot of our achievements,” said Jean

Barnes, the school's principal. Morning Star classes are ungraded she explained, "Success can merely be observed."

"For example, you see a student come in at an early age that has such severe anxiety that she won't even go into our gymnasium. By the time she's in eighth grade, she's now playing on the volleyball team at Christ the King – now that's success," Barnes proudly shared.

With Morning Star located so close to Christ the King Catholic School, students can participate in regular social events, attend Mass, play sports, and take classes when they are ready to move to a faster-paced environment. Although they are completely separate schools, Barnes said they have a very close relationship which benefits the students on both campuses.

While Morning Star is a Catholic school, 90 percent of its students are non-Catholic. Barnes said the school is, "an expression of the Catholic Church's concern for students with disabilities."

Kyle Vance, who graduated this year, said he loves his school because everyone treats all the kids equally.

"It [Morning Star] teaches you all about the Catholic faith and lets you decide whether or not you want to become Catholic."

Morning Star's individualized attention is just another one of the many things that makes this school unique. With a 12 to one student-teacher ratio, each student is blessed with the specialized attention they need to learn and grow.

And then, there's NOVA.

NOVA is a pet therapy dog that has called Morning Star home for the past two years thanks to the generosity of the H.E.A.L. foundation and Project Chance. She came to the school as a puppy and now provides behavioral and emotional support to students. NOVA coaxes students with anxiety out of their cars in the morning, has lunch with students that have met specific behavior goals, and even enjoys listening to stories read by students who are fearful of reading in front of a classroom.

A teacher at Morning Star since 1986, Barnes said parents would continually ask her where their child will go to school when they leave Morning Star. With the exception of Greenwood School in Jacksonville, there are no schools that provide students in higher grades attention they need to be successful.

This fall that will all change. A ninth grade class accommodating 12 students will open in August with construction expected to begin in October to include a full high school curriculum a year later. The school will partner with Bishop John J. Snyder High School to ensure that their students receive the full high school experience. Students will be able to



attend prom, homecoming, sporting events, and retreats with Bishop Snyder students while still receiving the personalized classroom setting that they need. There are about eight 2016 Morning Star graduates returning for high school said Barnes.


In May, the last day of class, eighth-graders sat at their desks with long, laminated posters teaming with affirmations in front of them. Their teacher read a book to them titled, Love you Forever and as a class, they picked out the themes in their graduation Mass readings.

Picture the most peaceful, attentive and respectful class of 12 that you can possibly imagine – that was Morning Star's eighth grade graduating class.

One of the students raised his hand and shared, "This school makes you feel like you're at home." It was clear that the other graduates agreed; this safe-haven school has indeed been their home for the past nine years.

"I tell people when I steer them to Morning Star, it doesn't look like the Taj Mahal from the outside but what happens inside is miraculous. This is why Morning Star is special. It provides a home for students who struggled in every other school. It is miraculous," said Dr. John Luciano, principal of Holy Spirit Catholic School and the parent of a Morning Star graduate.

"What we do here is help each child discover their strengths and the gifts that God has given them and we build on those strengths, and we remediate the weaknesses, and we help them to become who we always knew they could be," said Barnes.

And for the past 60 years, Morning Star has been doing just that. 

“
While Morning Star is a Catholic school, 90 percent of its students are non-Catholic. Barnes said the school is, “an expression of the Catholic Church’s concern for students with disabilities.”

To learn how you can become part of the Morning Star High School Capital Campaign or to register your child at Morning Star, call (904) 721-2144 or visit www.morningstar-jax.org.