



CELEBRATING CATHOLIC SCHOOLS 2017

In honor of National Catholic Schools Week, Jan. 29-Feb. 4, we are celebrating a new chapter for Morning Star School and sharing some memories about the state's oldest Catholic high school, St. Joseph Academy and Bishop Kenny High School.

A New High School for Morning Star

BY LILLA ROSS



A new Catholic high school is opening this fall – Morning Star.

Construction is underway on a new wing of the special education school, adjacent to Christ the King Parish, Jacksonville. It is expected to be ready when school opens in August.

Founded in 1956 by Archbishop Joseph P. Hurley, Morning Star School serves students who have a diagnosed learning disability, attention deficit disorders, high-functioning autism and mild intellectual disorders.

The school has a unique model – a 12 to 1 student-teacher ratio, individualized education and a partnership with Bishop Snyder High School.

The \$1.5 million expansion will provide much needed relief to the overcrowded school, which has 118 students from five counties in kindergarten through ninth grade, said Principal Jean Barnes.

For five years it has been renting space for its middle school classes from Christ the King School. The ninth grade was added last fall.

The new building will have eight classrooms – four for middle school and four for high school – and a media technology center. The high school can accommodate 48 students.

"This is something we have been trying to get done, for me personally for 30 years," Barnes said. "I started in 1986 teaching eighth grade, and I would wonder where do my kids go? There was nowhere. It was heartbreaking. It's been a hard-fought battle for all our parents who are committed to a Catholic education."

Amber Hall has two children – her son Lorenzo, 15, and daughter Chyann, 10 – enrolled in Morning Star.

"I am so happy they are doing this. My son



WOODY HUBAND

■ Seated in front are members of the first graduating class of Morning Star High School. Joining them are their classmates at Bishop John J. Snyder High School with Bishop Emeritus John J. Snyder.



WOODY HUBAND

■ "This project should enliven our faith," Bishop Felipe Estévez said at the ground-breaking Nov. 29. "When you look to the interests of your neighbor and serve them, we become God's co-workers."

is in ninth grade and I've been so nervous about putting him in a different school," Hall said. "I love this school. They are making A's and B's. I don't think that would be happening if they were in public school."

The students are taught the same curriculum used in other diocesan schools, with an individualized study plan. Morning Star also offers speech and language therapy, guidance services, music, art, physical education and religious education. The school also has a STEM lab, iPad lab and netbook.

Scholarships are available to students.

Marco and Lisa Renhack have a McKay scholarship that pays 100 percent of the tuition for their son, Franco, 8, who has a seizure disorder from viral encephalitis and learning disabilities.

Franco attended public and other private schools before they found Morning Star, Renhack said. "He started last year and he had a very good year. The school is such a blessing. We never expected him to fit in so well."

Even though his son is only 8, Renhack, a Morning Star board member, said he and his wife are already thinking about the future.

"We have a 9-year-old daughter and she will probably go to Bishop Kenny, but we didn't know where Franco would go," he said. "When they started talking at the board meeting about expanding the program to high school we were ecstatic. They have kids lined up who used to go Morning Star and can't wait to come back."

To provide the students a more typical high school experience, Morning Star has partnered with Bishop Snyder High School, Barnes said.

"Our students go to Bishop Snyder for retreats, for football games and they've gone to the homecoming dance," Barnes said.

"As small as we are, one of our concerns is being able to offer our high school students social and spiritual experiences. With our partnership with Bishop Snyder they get the best of both worlds – individualized academics, a social life and

tradition-to-work skills and then they go to Bishop Snyder and can be part of that rich high school experience. The kids at Bishop Snyder have been so amazing, so welcoming. Our students have fit right in."

Deacon David Yazdiya, principal at Bishop Snyder High, said a strong bond quickly formed between the students at both schools.

"It has benefited us every bit as much as it has them," he said. "Our students have grown close to the Morning Star students they are paired with. They have come to appreciate the diversity of both schools."

Morning Star students wear the Bishop Snyder colors red and gold with the Morning Star logo.

When Morning Star's students begin graduating, they will receive their diplomas at Bishop Snyder's graduation ceremony.

Dr. John Luciano, whose son attended Morning Star, wishes his son had had the option of going to high school there when he graduated in 2008.

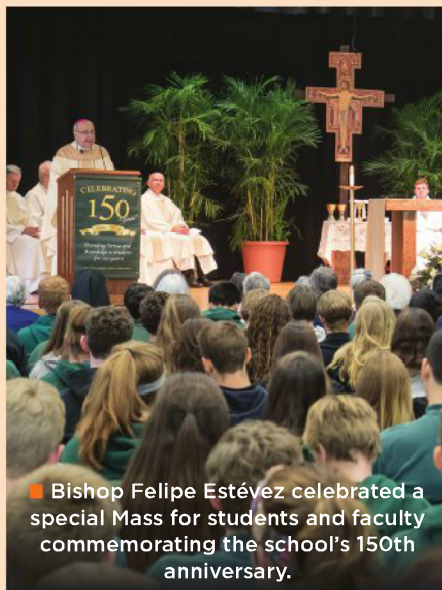
"Morning Star did so much more for him," Luciano said. "It's a small environment with a slower pace where he learned his faith. He was active in student government, worked on the yearbook, and organized a dance. If you are in a huge setting those opportunities are limited. You can pull the rug out from under them when you put them into a college prep environment."

In addition to being the parent, Dr. Luciano is principal of Holy Spirit Catholic School, and sees from an educator's perspective the value of having a Catholic high school for students with learning disabilities.

"In a Catholic school each child is seen as a unique creation of God. It developed in him a sense of service toward others. Shame on us if we have a child who comes out of a Catholic school and they don't think of others before themselves. That was a bonus. It met his learning needs but also trained his heart."

His son is now in college.

To learn more about Morning Star and to contribute to the "Building a Brighter Future" capital campaign, visit www.morningstar-jax.org or call (904) 721-2144.



■ Bishop Felipe Estévez celebrated a special Mass for students and faculty commemorating the school's 150th anniversary.



■ SJA Student, Carter Hinman, escorts Sister Thomas Joseph McGoldrick for the 150th anniversary festivities.

St. Joseph Academy Celebrates 150 Years



It's been more than 70 years, so it's probably OK to fess up – they ate birthday cake after lights out in the dorm at St. Joseph's Academy. Sister Thomas Joseph McGolderick says so.

She wasn't "Sister Thomas Joseph" back then. She was a boarding student, but 20 years later after she had taken her vows as a Sister of St. Joseph, she would come back as a teacher and then principal. And there was no getting anything past her. She was wise to all the shenanigans.

St. Joseph Academy, the oldest Catholic school in the state, celebrates its 150th anniversary this year.

Sister Thomas Joseph has a unique perspective as a former student, teacher, principal and member of the religious order that founded the school. She is now 90 and part-time manager at the Miguel O'Reilly House Museum.

Eight Sisters of St. Joseph, who came from France at the request of Bishop Augustin Verot to teach the children of newly freed slaves, founded the school in 1866. But soon classes were held for white children as well, girls at first, and then boys.

By the time Sister Thomas Joseph was a student, the school occupied two buildings adjacent to the convent on St. George Street. Sister Thomas Joseph estimates there were about 90 students. Only girls were boarders, and some of them were as young as 4 years old.

Those who wanted to go to Mass

got up at 6 a.m. Breakfast was at 8 a.m. and classes began at 8:45. Study hall was held each evening after dinner for the boarders. For recreation there was swimming, tennis and sewing classes on Saturday.

She graduated in 1944 and two days later entered the convent. She returned to St. Joseph in 1950 to teach mathematics in the high school, which had about 250 students. In 1960 she became principal for a year.

She also was a dorm nun, and as a former student she was quick to recognize the clink of a pebble on a window as a sign that a boy was downstairs in the bushes trying to get the attention of a girl.

"By that time we had schools in Miami, Orlando and Jacksonville. We were spread out all over," Sister Thomas Joseph said.

Among the graduates making a name for themselves were historian Michael Gannon and May Mann Jennings, Florida's first lady at the turn of the 20th century.

The boarding school closed in 1968, and in 1980 the school moved to a new campus on State Road 207.

It has grown into a four-year college preparatory school with more than 400 students and two dozen faculty.