

# Morning Star School Dedicates a State-of-the-Art Outdoor Morning Star School Dedicates a State-of-the-Art Outdoor Fitness Area • April 14, 2021 • Diocese of St. Augustine

By Fran Ruchalski



A student makes it to the top of the climbing wall and Deacon Scott Conway, Superintendent of Catholic Schools, prays during the blessing ceremony. (photos by St. Augustine Catholic/Fran Ruchalski)

After years of dreaming, two years of planning, designing, and hauling many truckloads of dirt and rocks to build a mountain for it to stand on, the Chartrand Family Outdoor Fitness Center at Morning Star School in Jacksonville was officially blessed by Bishop Felipe Estévez on Monday, April 12.

Morning Star School, the only special education school in the Diocese of St. Augustine serving K-12 children with learning and intellectual differences, has a current enrollment of 138 students: 48 in the primary grades, 40 in middle school, and 50 in high school.

The school built a new outdoor fitness center thanks to a \$200,000 donation from the Gary and Nancy Chartrand Advised Fund.

When Morning Star School Director of Development Maria Johnson reached out to the family charity to see if they'd be interested in bringing this facility to reality, the ball got rolling. According to Gary Chartrand, they are "big supporters of North Florida schools."

The equipment chosen was provided by the Kompan Playground Team, who met with the P.E. coaches to assess their needs.

As the school already had playground equipment for the younger children, they needed equipment that students in the upper grades could use.

The area had been "nothing but dirt" and a muddy hill before construction. The fitness center will be used for outdoor classes, lunches, games, and different programs for the students.

"It's important for them to get outside, especially now that kids are at their computers all the time," said Chartrand, who was a P.E. major in college. "They need to get out more."

"Having a state-of-the-art outdoor fitness area will not only meet the needs and unique abilities of these young people, but it will encourage healthy activities and habits that are so important in life," commented his wife, Nancy.

P.E. Coach Natalie Bryan, who has been at the school for 35 years, believes the kids are making the most of it. They're able to have physical education classes three times a week. But the students ask for more time if they can get it."

"They're amazing," Bryan says.



Bishop Felipe Estévez sprinkles Holy Water on the staff, students, guests and fitness equipment during the blessing ceremony.  
(photo by St. Augustine Catholic/Fran Ruchalski)

The students can access different exercise routines by scanning the code on each piece of equipment with their iPads.

What does it mean to the students to have this equipment?

Bryan says, “For the students who would normally not be as active, they want to be out here all day, every day. The fitness center is not just for athletes.”

“In this day and age where health and fitness are such an integral part of our society, this was perfect timing,” she says. “And such a blessing. They’re excited about it, and they are working on trying new things.”

P.E. Coach Angela Whitson adds, “The students are so inventive, figuring out what they can and can’t do. They challenge themselves and their classmates, which is nice.”

Whitson also says that because of this equipment and what they can accomplish, the student’s confidence level rises to new levels as they believe they can do it, which carries over into other things in their lives as well.

The new fitness center allows these students to strive and do well, which has not always been the case. And just maybe someday, you’ll be seeing some of these kids competing as Ninja Warriors.