

OUTSTANDING PRIVATE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

Raising 21st Century Men

At St. David's School, a dual focus on education and character

By Susan M. Sippelle

When a visitor entered a math class at St. David's School, one of the students, dressed neatly in khaki pants, a blue blazer and button-down shirt and tie, quietly left his seat and introduced himself. The student looked the newcomer directly in the eye while they shook hands and asked politely, "Would you like me to explain what we're studying today?" At St. David's School, tradition and manners still count.

Founded in 1951 by nine Catholic families who wanted to give their sons an independent but not parochial education, today St. David's has close to 400 nursery school through 8th grade boys from a variety of religious and ethnic backgrounds. The school's fundamental mission is to graduate "good men" who can achieve balance in scholarship, athletics, aesthetics and spirituality.

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A knighting ceremony heralds graduation from 3rd to 4th grade at St. David's. In preparation, each boy makes a shield that represents his character and qualities. Later, the shields are displayed on the walls of the cafeteria. During the ceremony itself, held in the school's chapel, the headmaster grandly dubs each student a "Knight of St. David." Afterward,

students celebrate the occasion with a feast, which they are allowed to eat with their hands. The school's older students juggle, jest and sing for the younger students' entertainment and merriment.

"It's rigorous academically," said Laurie Lepeyre, a parent, "but it's not an unhealthy, stressful environment.

Her son Pierre, 15, attended St. David's for 10 years and graduated in the spring of 2007. Last year, she accompanied the 8th-graders and their teachers on the school's

annual 10-day art history trip to Italy, which she described as wonderful—but grueling.

The trip culminates the work the boys do at St. David's and illustrates the focus the school places on the concept of balance, according to Lepeyre. The tour of

Florence, Assisi and Rome explored art, religion and history, but did not neglect math or sports. The boys' math teacher asked them to use geometry to calculate the length of the shadows cast by Italian towers, and the school reserves athletic fields in advance so that the boys can play soccer as they travel.

Lepeyre believes that the school's emphasis on spirituality helps remind the boys what is important in life. Pierre wrote in an e-mail that his years at St. David's had been wonderful and included a quote from Plutarch to partly summarize his experience there: "The whole of life is but a moment in time. It is our duty, therefore, to use it, not to misuse it."

In 1st and 2nd grades, St. David's students attend a weekly chapel service focused on Bible stories. From 3rd grade up, boys attend chapel daily. They listen to their teachers talk about a wide-ranging variety of subjects: One morning last spring, O'Halloran recalled, a female teacher vividly



Dr. David O'Halloran, headmaster.

described her first adrenalin-surging skydiving leap out of an airplane.

Community service is also an integral part of the school's curriculum, not just an after-school requirement that students must fulfill. Last year's 4th-graders raised money for service dogs and visited Seeing

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The goal of St. David's is to educate boys with a balance in scholarship, athletics, aesthetics and spirituality.

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for the excellent job she is doing," Brewer wrote in an e-mail. "I'm glad to have been able to provide funds for their new and beautifully designed reading garden," she added. The space was planned to give the children hands-on gardening experience and an outdoor spot in which to hold a poetry reading or a class.

After the garden was built but not yet planted, work on the project slowed. A group of 4th grade girls formed a committee to discuss the matter with their

principal and assembled in her office. The girls were dressed as characters from their favorite books, as the meeting happened to be scheduled during the school's reading week. Getz, who taught at P.S. 87 17 years ago and returned as the school's principal in July 2006, was clearly delighted by their enthusiasm and activism. She arranged for them to meet with and question city park personnel about the timetable for the stalled garden project.

"We've always had wonderful teachers and really active parents," Kaplan said, "and now we have a great principal who can lead them." ■



SUSAN M. SIPPHELLE

A group lesson in the gym at P.S. 87.

ST. DAVID'S

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Eye, Inc., in Morristown, N.J. Seventh-graders assume the responsibility of visiting local nursing homes every year during school hours.

Despite the importance the school places on spirituality, "We don't think of ourselves as a religious school," O'Halloran said. Students do not have to be Catholic to apply or attend, and the school has always had a lay faculty.

The school does not follow any single educational method but capitalizes on best teaching practices, according to O'Halloran. Composition and public speaking are stressed throughout the curriculum.



SUSAN M. SIPPHELLE

Students in the library at St. David's.

Class sizes at St. David's range from 13 to 16 boys. The school recently added a music suite that includes space for

practice, lessons and small performances. Boys' artwork adorns the school's red and cream walls on every floor of

the building.

After graduation, about 60 percent of the school's students attend independent high schools in the New York metropolitan area; the remainder go on to boarding schools, primarily in the Northeast and mid-Atlantic.

O'Halloran, who has been the school's headmaster for the past three years, said that the greatest challenge that St. David's faces is defining what it means to be both highly educated and a good man in the 21st century. The school must continually consider how to prepare its students for a rapidly changing world and teach them to search large quantities of information and synthesize it rapidly. "Schools need to teach children to ask questions," O'Halloran said, "and to stand up for what is right." ■

MARYMOUNT

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passionate about the classroom. Eleanor Bedrash, head of the lower school, said she loves Marymount because the curriculum is "academically challenging and thoughtfully implemented." Alvar, the headmistress, talked eagerly about differentiated learning in Marymount's curriculum—how each student is mentored and taught according to her own strengths and weaknesses.

Part of what helps students excel is the school's small size and emphasis on building self-esteem. Students are kept on track, even when they falter, with a vast support network and small 6:1 student-teacher ratio. The lower school—kindergarten through 4th grade—is housed in the same complex as the upper school (grades 7 to 12), which means that the littlest girls get mentoring and support from their "big sisters." Middle-schoolers are in a building all their own around the corner.

Beyond the basics, Marymount's extracurricular and enrichment offerings are boosted by its location. Faculty say students visit the Metropolitan Museum more than children at any other school, and with Central Park right across the street, vast fields, paths and groves create the biggest schoolyard imaginable.

Grounded by its distinctively New York location, the school still places a big focus on the international community. Manhattan's Marymount shares a relationship with Marymounts around the globe, all of which were originally founded by the Religious of the Sacred Heart of Mary. Network schools have exchange programs and pen-pal arrangements with schools from Paris to Zimbabwe. At an annual conference for Marymounts worldwide, several faculty and staff from New York's branch get to learn and share ideas with global colleagues. From this conference, a special theme is chosen from the six goals and criteria shared by all Marymount schools. Goals have included "unity

through diversity" and "to awaken a consciousness of social justice."

The school takes its commitment to such goals seriously. "It's not like you just see signs," Williams said. "Teachers talk the talk."

The mission-oriented vibe extends to parents, too. There are regular crafts days for parents and students, and the Parents Association, William said, makes a point to stress that time, not money, is the most important gift parents can give.

Ultimately, though, Issa feels there's a simple reason that draws parents to the school.

"Parents choose the Marymount environment," she said, "because they want safe, happy and healthy children." ■



ANDREW SCHWARTZ

One of Marymount's goals is to empower girls and teach to both their strengths and weaknesses.