

# Classroom projects help St. Thomas the Apostle students form servant hearts

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*St. Thomas the Apostle held its annual spring carnival, which included attractions for all ages on Feb. 28, 2015. (Billy Hardiman/CATHOLIC SUN)*

**N**ora Hinkle recalled the look of amazement on the faces of her new friends with Down syndrome when her class hosted a group from the Down Syndrome Network of Arizona at the school's Feb. 28 carnival.

“They’re still like us. They want to have fun,” said Hinkle, a fourth-grader at St. Thomas the Apostle School, who happens to know somebody from her ballet class with Down syndrome, “There’s no need to baby them.”

The event was a result of the STA Serves program at St. Thomas the Apostle. The program is in its fourth year of matching students with age-appropriate ways to make giving of their time and talent a sustained way of life. Each grade level – including the preschoolers – partners with a local organization for most of the school year to first learn about its mission and daily work, and then support outreach through supply drives and personal visits.

The fourth-graders, many who begin the school year freshly confirmed in their faith, are continuing the school's relationship with the Down Syndrome Network. Students met a team of parents and guest speakers whose lives are impacted by Down syndrome earlier in the year and experienced "a day in the life" workshops allowing them a glimpse through the Down Syndrome lens.

One activity had the fourth-graders trying to get dressed and do other routine tasks with socks on their hands. Another had them putting marshmallows in their mouths and trying to talk.

"When you did that, you could tell how they felt... because they couldn't understand us clearly," said Hinkle.

The fourth-graders have gotten used to understanding their new friends who come with an extra chromosome and range in age from toddler to young adults with Down syndrome. The classroom visit spawned time together at Down Syndrome Network of Arizona events and play dates, such as the carnival.





*The STA Serves program at St. Thomas the Apostle School, now in its fourth year, teaches students in every grade level about the importance of service through hands-on, creative projects. (Billy Hardiman/CATHOLIC SUN)*

Hinkle’s classmate Anna Bowles remembers one of their buddies showing more bravery than the students when it came to the “Cliff jump” and the genuine exclamation of “I did it!”

Bowles agreed describing them as normal people. She recalled one of her buddies with Down syndrome making faces at herself in the mirror during the holiday party.

“They take on a nurturing/leadership role with such confidence,” said Kathy Hinkle, Nora’s mom. “They show a lot of maturity when they’re with the kids.”

The experience has taught them to be gentle listeners too, who are eager to help others because they need assistance, need a friend or deserve generosity based on merit. The fifth-graders, for example, support Arizona Military Assistance Mission with active duty service members and the National Guard with rent, utilities and other expenses.

St. Thomas the Apostle preschoolers and kindergarteners host an annual chili luncheon for local police and fire departments. They also sponsor an annual Bears for the Brave stuffed animal drive for emergency personnel to give to victimized children. They've collected over 3,000 stuffed animals in the last four years.

"I wanted our kids to really feel service by offering all of these different connections that could take them through a lifetime," said Pam Hudgins, counselor at St. Thomas the Apostle who oversees the service program.

She and a core team of parents wanted to find something that brought their service efforts under one umbrella and moved beyond having children give something to a food pantry from their own cabinets.

***"Jesus came to serve not to be served, so serving others will help us get closer to God."***

Emily McLaughlin, a school parent, agreed. She said exposure and awareness can go a long way to help shape and form children.

"If presented with these opportunities at an early age, service to others can be a way of living instead of something we force our children to do or something we check off on a list of to do's," McLaughlin said.

Sixth-graders coordinate weekly meals for peers living in Boys Hope Girls Hope group homes and spending time in fellowship. By the time St. Thomas the Apostle students reach the eighth grade, they're completing home makeovers for local St. Vincent de Paul families and regularly supporting children during evening meals in the Family Dining Room.

In December, the eighth-graders rallied support from the school and greater community – in the course of one day with a continuing threat of rain – to turn a three-bedroom Phoenix house for parents and four young boys with no beds and an unfinished floor into a carpeted home with usable play space in the backyard and a garden.

“When the family walked in, the parents were speechless. They didn’t even know what to say,” said eighth-grader Katie Holmes, who laid sod out back, “We all felt so happy and so proud for this family and helping the kids get off to a good start.”

Holmes, who has been at St. Thomas the Apostle since kindergarten, said the school’s focus on service teaches students to embrace the idea at an early age. Holmes and her brothers have supported book drives on their own with Holmes also hosting art supply drives for Free Arts of Arizona, an organization the first-graders support.

“Jesus came to serve not to be served, so serving others will help us get closer to God,” Holmes said.



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