

Character counts at St. John's Episcopal

By Janet Wolfe

When first grade student Anthony Gargan faces a task he doesn't want to do, he thinks about things that make him happy – playing, eating Hershey bars – and finishes the task. In February he learned that he could do anything as long as he has a positive attitude. The month before, he learned to keep trying, even in the face of adversity. In fact, since school started, Gargan and his schoolmates at St. John's Episcopal School in Olney have studied and practiced a different moral quality each month.

Commonly referred to as "Traits for Success," St. John's character education program helps students become compassionate, responsible individuals, not just academic achievers, by studying and practicing nine character traits that the school feels are integral to a student's success: organization, attentiveness, courage, faith, persistence, flexibility, generosity, responsibility and of course, a positive attitude.

"It's not difficult," says Wes Wehunt, former fourth grade teacher and now admissions director at St. John's. "It just

... St. John's character education program helps students become compassionate, responsible individuals, not just academic achievers ...

takes conscious effort."

On the first Wednesday of every month, Wehunt introduces one of the nine character traits by profiling a historical individual who exemplifies that trait. In April, "generosity" month, Wehunt spoke about chocolate mogul Milton Hershey, who built Hershey Park so his employees would have somewhere to play. Then Wehunt gave each student a Jolly Rancher (a Hershey candy) with the instruction to give the candy to someone who didn't already have a piece. Anthony Gargan gave his to his parents.

Throughout the rest of the month, teachers highlight examples of the trait and provide practical exercises, which they weave into regular classroom activities and art projects. The students also attend other assemblies that help them relate the traits for success to every day life: the lower school (elementary) director talks about a

personal experience, some students recite poetry, and other students sing, play instruments, and exhibit other artistic talents, an opportunity, Wehunt says, for the students to practice some of the traits, like courage and responsibility.

Practicing the traits becomes more critical as the students progress from the lower school (kindergarten through fifth grade) to the upper school (sixth through eighth grade).

"We're at the top of the lower school," says T.J. Brockway, a fifth grader. "So we have to show all the traits for success for the little kids. We're like their role models."

The character education program touches all student activities. The sports teams include anyone who wants to play – not just those students especially gifted at the sport – and all students, no matter what their skill level, play an equal amount of time. The eighth grade gradua-

tion program emphasizes the students' development as strong individuals: each graduate receives two diplomas, one for academics and one for character. Even discipline revolves around character. Wehunt, who says the majority of discipline problems stem from lack of organization, reviews the traits for success with the students and helps them identify the character trait they need to improve on.

St. John's doesn't rely solely on in-class lessons to encourage its student. Wehunt says the school actively seeks out living examples of people who balance character with achievement, and it seeks outside opportunities that allow the students to practice both.

Approximately 200 students traveled to hear Dr. Ben Carson, the director of pediatric neurosurgery at the Johns Hopkins Medical Institutions, speak about character. The students regularly participate in commu-

nity service.

"We try to make it about more than just paper," says Wehunt. "We try to find ways for kids to live these things out."

Enrollment at St. John's, founded in 1961 by the Rev. James Valliant, has nearly doubled in the past five years, and it's easy to see why. St. John's character education program and small class sizes (enrollment is limited to 18 students per class, two classes per grade) facilitate close relationships and better learning, and these features attract students and parents from all religions and from all over the area – including Mt. Airy, Silver Spring and Laurel.

"We live about 10 minutes from here," says Gwen Caudle, mother of a St. John's first grader, "but I would travel far if I had to. It's worth it. It's worth any sacrifice you have to make. You can tell [the students] are happy here."

"I went to public school before I came here," said Megan Oliver, a fourth grader at St. John's, "and they had no such thing as traits for success. Everybody was mean, and it wasn't too good."

Flower Mart brings Mexico closer



Flower Mart comes but once a year, and this year it brought a little bit of Mexico with it. Attractions included (clockwise starting from left) a floral tribute to the country that featured a burro; barbequed pit beef cooked by Patrick Michael from Sunshine's Catering of Hollywood, Md.; a precipitous rock-climbing wall scaled by 7-year-old Sam Grauberger; and a Sun Conure parrot discovered by 5-year-old Emma Greenfield in the Rolling Rainforest, provided by Discovery Creek Children's Museum.

Photos by Amy Elliott

