



St. James the Apostle School

EMPOWERS STUDENTS

to Make a Difference

How do you encourage your child to love God? How do you help your child “own” their relationship with God? You pray with your child as they grow; you take your child to Mass every week, but how and when do they own their faith?

When does it become theirs and not yours?

Story by Lisa Mirabella-Orwig, a parishioner of St. James Parish in Glen Ellyn

These have always been questions of mine as a mom. For me, I owned my faith from a young age. My wonderful parents sent me to Catholic grade school and Catholic high school and took us to Mass weekly, but did not require much more than that.

As a mom today, my husband (who is not Catholic) and I felt that Catholic school was the best choice for our three kids. But even so, sending your child to Catholic school doesn’t guarantee that your child will own his or her faith.

A Catholic school does, however, offer many opportunities and experiences to form the moral and spiritual character of a child.

As our search for a Catholic school began, we decided to look close to home first. We visited St. James the Apostle in Glen Ellyn, and we immediately felt welcomed and part of the community. The small, nurturing atmosphere teaches students the fundamentals of our beautiful Catholic faith while allowing parents to get involved in a host of different organizations — school board, athletics, parent teacher and a variety of faith-based activities. Christian service is a ministry that appealed to me and would — hopefully — give me the opportunity to see the fruits of faith in action.

St. James calls the faith-in-action ministry Ripples of Faith. The idea is one small act of love leads to countless ripples of faith. The ministry began by organizing monthly service projects. Each grade was responsible for holding a collection or drive for a charitable organization. The first grade might collect school supplies for

Humanitarian Service Project in September; in October the seventh grade might be responsible for collecting gently-used board games for People's Resource Center, etc. Each grade supports their project by making posters and going room-to-room, educating the students about their particular cause. The students benefit by learning about the plight of those less fortunate (and they get some public speaking experience) and the recipient agency gets needed items. This is wonderful and important work; however, students were not seeing the direct impact of their service.

The Ripples of Faith team — which is comprised of one teacher, Audrey Krueger, and two school moms, Ellen Green and myself — felt that the “burden” of giving was placed more on the parent and less on the student. After all, it was usually mom or dad who would have to run to the store to buy school supplies or search the closets for the gently-used board games. And the question remained: do these monthly service projects do enough to help the students own their own faith?

From this question, the Day of Service was born in April 2013. Audrey, Ellen and I wanted to create opportunities for each student to leave the classroom and spend one day thinking about and caring for others who are less fortunate. We selected a range of partner organizations to work with that serve a variety of people — the elderly, the hungry, the physically disabled — and animals. We had 13 off-site partners, such as the Glen Ellyn Food Pantry, Almost Home Kids, the DuPage Convalescent Center, Marklund Day Home, and Watts of Love.

A team of students, who are led by teachers and parent chaperones, volunteer for several hours off campus. When they return to campus, they become engaged in a variety of hands-on service projects. Some of these projects include making no-sew blankets for Family Shelter Services, creating birthday boxes for children who might never get a birthday party, making dog treats and adoption posters for the Western DuPage Humane Society. The day ends with a prayer service and reflection time in each classroom. This gives students the opportunity to talk about what they did, what they learned and how they felt about their experiences. The teachers get to hear first-hand how this day impacts the students and draw from that experience in future lessons.

Audrey Krueger, who teaches fifth grade at St. James and is the leader of Day of Service, says, “I am sure that our Day of Service is making an

impact. For some, it is an immediate impact, one seen tomorrow in our community and students, but for some the effect is not immediately visible. However, I am confident that these days are forming our students’ social justice mindset and making an impact on their futures. It is making them aware of people and situations outside of their own, and getting them thinking about what they can do to improve the lives of others.”

I think she’s right. Mira M., a seventh grader, served at Almost Home Kids this year. Reflecting on the Day of Service, she wrote, “I met a one-year-old boy. When I read to him, his eyes would light up and I was filled with joy! His reaction made me feel like a true disciple of God. Now, after reflecting on my experience, I am inspired to volunteer at hospitals for children.”

Haley R. served at Marklund and said, “Day of Service is always an eye-opening experience. It is the day we get to step out into the world and serve others. Working with these kids made me feel like I was fulfilling the work of God. I was motivated to do more as a faithful disciple. Sometimes we need experiences like this to show us what is really meaningful to us in our own lives.”

Maddie P., an eighth grader, commented, “I am so thankful to St. James for giving me this amazing opportunity to be like Jesus and love others.”

Four years later, Day of Service has become an integral part of who St. James the Apostle is. Mary Kathryn Warco, the principal of St. James, says, “Day of Service allows our students to put their faith into action. It represents so much of what we teach and hope to instill in our students: generosity, compassion, kindness, charity, service and love.”

St. James the Apostle still has its monthly service projects, but we all feel the Day of Service is really the big event that we know will help students own their faith.

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HAVE SOMEONE IN MIND?

If you know of an organization that would benefit from a Day of Service, please call **630.469.8060**

◀ The Ripples of Faith team: (L-R) Ellen Green, Audrey Krueger and Lisa Mirabella, the author of the article.