A Pilot’s Tradition

San Juan Diego Academy has received a wonderful surprise: an unsolicited donation from John James, the 2020 Republican candidate for the United States Senate. During his campaign, Mr. James, a graduate of West Point and a helicopter pilot, made a pledge to make a difference in the lives of Michiganders. Although he was not elected to the Senate he has stood by that commitment and has distributed his remaining campaign funds across the state. Our school is benefiting from his generosity.

A member of his staff explained that Mr. James is distributing funds in 5 percent increments, following a pilot’s tradition, the Nickel Ride. It’s a long-standing military practice in which after a first successful solo flight, a helicopter pilot gives the flight instructor a nickel. It’s a way to give back. Mr. James has interpreted this tradition by supporting charitable giving to Michiganders across the state. How did Mr. James decide on San Juan Diego Academy? The staff member said he wanted to make a difference in West Michigan and in the city of Wyoming. He wanted to help the Latino community, and research showed that our school and its mission were the right fit for his pilot’s tradition.

Thank you, Mr. James, for enriching the lives of our students and supporting our mission to make an SJDA education possible for Latino children in our area.

School traditions are important, and all eighth graders look forward to re-enacting the Stations of the Cross.

G R A C I A S

WE COULDN’T DO IT WITHOUT YOU!

SAINTS ($50,000+)

Lawrence Sr. and Nancy Erhardt
Dave and Carol Burgess
Michael and Susan Jandernoa
Kenneth and Edie Muraski
DISCIPLES ($10,000+)

James and Shirley Balk
Mercantile Bank
St. Pius X Church
William and Jane Cretens
Jay and Patty Stephan
Philip and Dawnielle Streng
Nancee and Mark Siehling
Thomas Sarb and Ruth Ann Brevita
Nanee and Mark Siehling
Philip and Dawnielle Streng
Jay and Patty Stephan
Brian and Luella Van Haren

GIFT MATCHING PROGRAMS

American Express Foundation
Benedict
PNC Foundation
Steelecase Foundation

FOUNDBATION

Bryan Foundation
Sebastian Foundation
Wege Foundation
Krofft Foundation

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The eighth graders were resourceful too. They had a goal and figured out how to achieve it.

An eighth-grade graduation trip is a tradition at many schools, and at SJDA we too celebrate our students with a special day. With the help of their teachers, Laura Stetson and Ingrid Vredevoogd, the eighth graders developed a fundraising plan. The most successful was a once-a-month, school-wide dress-down day. Students also had a candy cane sale at Christmas and a pop can drive in the spring. Their success allowed them to hire a coach bus to transport them to three activities: a paintball tourney, a private movie screening at Celebration Cinema, and big fun at Craig’s Cruisers. This trip was very meaningful, because the responsibility for raising the funds and forming a consensus on the activities were all theirs—and so was the satisfaction of celebrating their achievements together as a class. We’re proud of them for this and so many other reasons.

Dress-down days were a successful fundraiser and a favorite for the whole school. Here’s Ms. Stetson’s class in December on Christmas Sweater Day.

THANK YOU!

You made it possible for San Juan Diego Academy to graduate one of the largest eighth grades in the Diocese of Grand Rapids. We are so proud of our students. They faced great challenges during this pandemic and somehow came through with flying colors. They would all agree that it was a relief to start the school year in person even if mask-wearing and constant handwashing were part of their new reality.

Your gifts of tuition assistance allowed this class to find success and prepare for the next step in their education journey. The cornerstone of our mission is to keep tuition at a level our families can afford, and your generosity allows us to do that. We celebrate with you because you’ve helped our eighth graders live our school’s affirmation, “¡Sí Se Puede!, Yes We Can!”

Our families feel a deep sense of gratitude for your support, and they are also immensely proud of their own contributions. This year required even more hard work and commitment from parents, and they faced the Covid challenge with their usual energy and grace.

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¡Sí Se Puede! Yes We Can!
Amazing 8th Graders  
**HOW THEY ROSE TO THE COVID CHALLENGE**

by Ingrid Vredevoogd

In the fall of 2020, I began teaching middle school language arts at San Juan Diego Academy; I was also one of the two eighth-grade homeroom teachers. I had just graduated from Aquinas College, where my teacher education courses were excellent, but teaching during a pandemic was somehow not on my list of required classes. In fact, no first-time teacher like me, nor even any experienced ones like many of my SJDA colleagues, could have predicted the impact the pandemic would have on schools. However, soon after I joined the team at SJDA, I saw that there would be no challenge this school community could not overcome. Our staff and families quickly came together to create the safest and most stimulating learning environment possible for our students. That process has only made us stronger. All of us were in awe of the way our students stepped up too. The tenacity they showed every day was truly inspiring. And although you might think it would be hard for a new teacher to form meaningful relationships with students while wearing a mask and practicing social distancing, my experience was quite the opposite. The bonds that formed between us were different in this year of distance, but stronger and better than I ever could have imagined. This year’s eighth-grade class—my first class—will always hold a special place in my heart.

Every morning at SJDA, each homeroom class begins the day by reciting our school creed. It begins with the teacher asking the students:

> **¿Se puede?** – meaning “Can we?”

**The students respond in unison:** ¡Sí, se puede! – meaning “Yes, we can!”

We continue the creed together by saying:

> I am a student at San Juan Diego Academy. I am faithful, respectful, responsible, and dependable. I will succeed in school. I will graduate from high school, and I will go to college.

I want to tell you about a fall morning when the school year was coming into full swing and my eighth-grade students were starting to emerge from their shells. On this day, they were abnormally quiet. Eventually I learned that this was because they were anxious about their first social studies test of the year, scheduled for the next day. By this time, the energy of the room shifted. One of the students looked up and in a confident and proud voice said, “I am a student at San Juan Diego Academy!” In that moment, the other students came to life, and all of them, in unison, declared with increasing volume that became a yell, “I am faithful, respectful, responsible, and dependable! I will succeed in school! I will graduate from high school! And I will go to college!”

When they finished declaiming that promise, the energy in the classroom was beautiful to see. The shift in confidence was not due to any words but to the way the students came together to encourage one another. It was a moment I will never forget, a testament to the grit of our Class of 2021. This group of students may have lost the end of their seventh-grade year, but they didn’t skip a beat when they returned for their final year at SJDA. It was an honor to work with them during my first year of teaching, and I will forever remember them for their humor, energy, and perseverance. To our graduates: We wish you all the best and will miss you dearly!

Mario García is a leader. He served as student council vice-president when he was in the seventh grade, and he’s always willing to speak in front of an audience. He’s very artistic, too! His comic characters decorated each teacher’s classroom and inspired his peers to try their hands at drawing. When IN-person school began again, he quickly re-engaged. He is never afraid to ask questions or offer answers in class.

Angela (Angie) Gonzalez-Martínez is the epitome of the SJDA student: faithful, respectful, responsible, and dependable. During distance learning she always wanted to extend the Zoom meetings with me to a check-in with her teacher and classmates. She encouraged others to talk about what was going on and tried to bridge the gap created by virtual learning. She’s always willing to step into leadership positions. Her classmates elected her May Crowning Queen because of the lovely traits like these. We wish her well at Catholic Central.

Mauricio Medina is a straight-A student. His work ethic kept him on-task during distance learning, and his drive to succeed has flourished with in-person instruction. He is a talented soccer player who travels to take on elite teams. He is a young man with a strong moral compass who is always willing to do the right thing even when his peers are not. He stepped up for the challenges ahead at Catholic Central High School and was incredibly pleased to place in honors math.

ON THE PATH

Jacob Toledo distanced learned until October, and it was a blessing to have him back in the classroom. Upon his return he was more engaged, and he became a class leader. He stepped up to portray Jesus during the Living Stations of the Cross and brought reverence to his role. He volunteers regularly in the fourth-grade classroom at our school. He also took it upon himself to take care of the American flag at the end of each school day and did so as a personal responsibility, not a chore.

Yaeslin Munoz (Ya-Ya) is a dedicated and diligent student. Not only does she have healthy academic habits, she is also highly creative and artistic. Ya-Ya aspires to a career in animation, and the comic strips she creates for her classmates and teachers are always well-received. Her willingness to reach out to other students, make friends, and be a good listener has earned her a special place in her graduating class.

¡Sí Se Puede! Yes We Can!

Here you have a glimpse of the kind of students who graduated from SJDA in this year of the pandemic. We give them so much credit for persevering, for having the will and the drive to make their last year at SJDA successful—and as normal as it could possibly be. We are proud that more than two-thirds of them will be attending Catholic Central in the fall. With your support these amazing young men and women will graduate as prepared, learn, and grow to be amazing people who are ready to face a new world of possibilities.