LEARNING

INSIDE STEPS: A Q & A WITH ST. THOMAS EPISCOPAL PARISH SCHOOL

Head of School Lillian Issa, student ambassadors, CFO Idanet Gonzalez, and Director of Admission Debby Lichtner welcome families to a school tour.

BY ANDREA CARNEIRO

ESTABLISHED IN 1953, ST. THOMAS EPISCOPAL Parish School has been around a long time and has touched countless members of our community. But, what makes St. Thomas truly special? We sat down with St. Thomas's new head of school, Lillian Issa, and Director of Admission and Enrollment Management, Debby Lichtner to talk campus, curriculum and what makes a school a community.

HOW WOULD YOU SUMMARIZE ST. THOMAS IN A COUPLE OF SENTENCES?

Ms. Lichtner: Now in its 63rd year, St. Thomas, a culturally diverse community, offers preschool through 5th grade with 425 students focused on learning 21st century skills. It operates with a foundation and focus based on our Episcopal identity, and there is a true partnership between parents, church, and school, so that we raise students to be good citizens of the world. This means that we are a community whose mission integrates spiritual formation into all aspects of the educational experience in a graceful and inclusive manner. As a school with this identity, we "strive for justice and peace among all people and to respect the dignity of every human being."

WHAT IS THE MOST IMPORTANT QUALITY THAT SETS ST. THOMAS APART?

Mrs. Issa: Our teachers are the best! When speaking to parents about their child's experience at St. Thomas, it seems to always be exceptional -- this is largely due to their child's teacher. Our students' lives are enriched by our ability to retain and hire quality teachers. We don't just support our teachers in the classroom, we have a significant budget allotted for continued professional development.

BRIEFLY TELL ME ABOUT YOUR CURRICULUM.

Ms. Lichtner: St. Thomas utilizes the STEAM method of teaching, integrating the key areas of learning (Science, Technology, Engineering, the Arts, and Math). The program is challenging, taught by educators who cultivate the intellectual and artistic learning styles of each child. We have several specialized instructional facilitators to coach teachers on all of the technology at their disposal, so that we are preparing students for the future Additionally, with the involvement of our school counselor, our curriculum focuses on social/emotional learning as we understand the importance of mindfulness -- the less stress a child has, the more successful he/she will be. Finally, on their way to becoming global citizens, when St. Thomas graduates leave for middle school, they do so with exceptional leadership skills and the confidence that comes from knowing they have been adequately prepared for this next important chapter.

HOW IS ENROLLMENT RIGHT NOW?

Mrs. Issa: Our school is stable and thriving. With an average class size of 19 children, we are at full capacity and can be selective with applicants to ensure the right fit. Our ability to retain students is phenomenal with a 3 percent attrition rate each year compared to the national average of 9 percent. And, our families are happy and satisfied as reflected in our 99-100 percent parent participation in Annual Giving!

HOW LARGE IS YOUR CAMPUS?

Ms. Lichtner: Our vast 6+ acre campus is beautiful and, more importantly, it is safe-guarded every school day by a Coral Gables police officer and security guards. We have two large playing fields, a dedicated art studio, music room, dance room, STEM lab, technology lab, performance stage, expansive outdoor lunch area, a fence-and-gate system that enhances our security, and state of the art shade structures over our preschool playground and lunch area. We will be completing our guardhouse, positioned where cars enter our parking lot, this summer.

WHAT WOULD YOU LIKE TO SAY TO FAMILIES WHO MIGHT BE CONSIDERING ST. THOMAS.

Mrs. Issa: St. Thomas is not just an education, it is a vibrant community that is an extension of family, creating friendships that last a lifetime. Being part of this community of learners and doers offers a unique opportunity for each to become part of something much bigger than themselves. We hope that they will visit us so that they can learn more about the opportunity surrounding the St. Thomas Episcopal School difference. We encourage them to visit our website, www.stepsmia.org, where we showcase the rich variety of programs available to our entire school community.

About St. Thomas Episcopal Parish School: Located in Coral Gables, Florida, St. Thomas Episcopal Parish School (STEPS) was founded in 1963. Now in its 63rd year, St. Thomas has grown to include grades junior preschool through 5th grade and has 425 students. It is a secure and loving community that nurtures and challenges children and teaches them to honor God, respect others and themselves, care for their world, and develop a lasting enthusiasm for discovering and learning. St. Thomas utilizes the STEAM method of teaching, integrating the key areas of learning (Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts and Math). For more information on St. Thomas, please call 305-665-4851 or visit www.stepsmia.org.

A few St. Thomas "seniors"

Fourth grade teacher, Miss Quiñones, and a few of her students.