

Alumni Newsletter

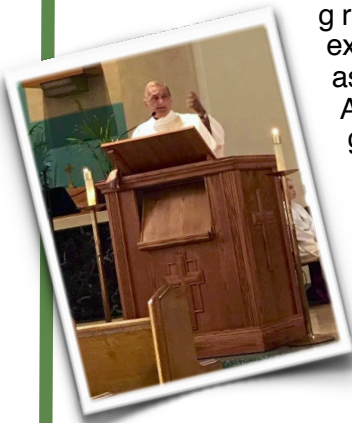
HONOR OUR PAST. BUILD OUR FUTURE

FATHER MIKE

In the gospel of Mark, on the Feast of the Transfiguration, Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good that we are here!" This citation was part of the greeting Fr. Mike extended to parishioners as he offered Mass on August 6. He was grateful to be "here" as was the congregation to have him back on the altar. He then extended a heartfelt thank you to all who encouraged and prayed for him during his illness.

This was his first weekend mass since April 30 of this year, when he was diagnosed with a brain tumor which was later identified as B-Cell Lymphoma. He underwent surgery to remove the tumor and, within days, began a 19-week regimen of chemotherapy at Roswell Park Institute. He is more than halfway through the chemo and is presently on a break from treatment for a few weeks. At the end of August, he will have an MRI to judge the effectiveness of the chemo followed by a few more treatments as determined by the results of the scans. His doctors give him a good prognosis. Up until this month, his chemo sessions were scheduled on the weekends, therefore he could not offer Mass at those times.

He tells all that he is feeling better each day and is actively participating in the day-to-day managing of the parish; attending meetings and overseeing all operations. The parish has been fortunate to have Fr. Romulo "Fr. Romy" Montero, serve as parochial vicar in the interim until such time that Fr. Mike is finished with his treatments and back at full strength. He still has a bit of a journey ahead of him, so please keep him in prayer for his return to good health.



Early Childhood Center Begins Fourth Year

The St. Francis of Assisi Early Childhood Center (ECC) continues to flourish. The Center, located in the Adam Street School building, is about to launch its fourth year in September. The Center has gained a stellar reputation in the Tonawandas and neighboring communities as the early childhood center of choice for three (3) and four (4) year old children. As a testament to this fact, we have a waiting list for registrations and some families have inquired about the program while their child is still an infant.

Under Fr. Mike Uebler's guidance, the Center opened in the fall of 2014. He had a vision that an early childhood center would help fill the void of the school and provide a needed service to the families of Tonawanda. Parents would be able to leave their child in a safe and caring Christian faith-based daycare center offering a preschool education to 3 and 4 year olds. Current enrollment is capped at 91 students by NY State staffing ratio regulations.

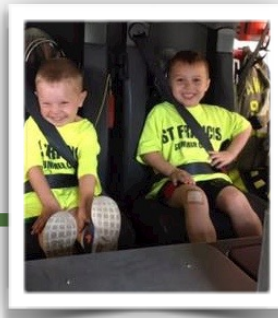
The Center is staffed with experienced and certified teachers. In addition to the academic curriculum, the children have "specials"; classes in religion, music, art, library and gym, which enhance their learning experience. The academic program prepares the children for success in kindergarten. Anecdotal reports from kindergarten teachers and parents, plus the results of pre-kindergarten testing, verify that St. Francis ECC students are well prepared for kindergarten academically and socially.

(Early Childhood Center continued)

The curriculum is organized around monthly themes that blend the foundations of learning, i.e., reading, writing, arithmetic, science and social studies, with fun activities that are age appropriate for the children. For any given theme, the students learn how to read and write related words, they listen to stories, sing songs and participate in hands-on activities involving science and art.

Butterflies are one of the favorite themes. The children study the life cycle of the butterfly. They raise butterflies from caterpillars in butterfly houses in each classroom. The culmination of the study is a ceremonial release of the butterflies in the St. Francis grotto.

In addition to the academic year from September through June, the Center offers a Summer Camp during July and August for children ages 4 to 8. Many of the children enrolled at the Center attend the camp and are joined with Center "alumni" and children from the community. The children participate in a variety of activities revolving around themes plus take several walking tours within the City of Tonawanda. Among the places they have visited are City Hall to meet the mayor, the Tonawanda Library and Tops Market. During Community Helpers week, the children spent time "behind bars", sat in a fire engine and visited the Post Office. (Left to right below)



Tuition Assistance Fund Recipients Tell Their Stories

For the past two years the alumni have been asked to support the St. Francis of Assisi Tuition Assistance Fund during our annual drive. As outlined in our recent letter, the parish provided \$21,500 in tuition support to 25 students this past academic year to attend local Catholic elementary schools. As of this writing, alumni have contributed \$2075 for this year's annual appeal. It's not too late to send your donation to support this worthy cause. If you have misplaced your remittance envelope, just send a letter with your check payable to St. Francis of Assisi RC Church and note "Tuition Assistance" in the memo field. As you will read, your gift, no matter the amount, is a sound investment in the future of many children's lives.

Three families have agreed to share how your contributions to the Tuition Assistance Fund have impacted their families. The parents and the children of these families are very active in the parish. They serve on various committees, help with many parish events, participate in Faith Formation, sing in the choir, serve or have served as altar servers and help wherever there is a need for someone to lend a hand.

Kathy and Dan ('84) Deyell are parents of five sons. Kathy currently manages the Scrip program, which is a vital contributor to the Tuition Assistance Fund. Three of their sons graduated St. Francis School before it closed and the two younger boys attend a local Catholic school.

Kathy shares some background on Scrip and her thoughts on tuition assistance. She writes, "Our family has been involved with the St. Francis Scrip program since Tim, our oldest—now beginning his Junior year of college—began Pre-K at St. Francis. The Scrip program was fairly young then, but was a promising new way to raise money for the school while reducing the number of individual fundraisers that needed to be held. Even in those early years, the program helped us afford Catholic school tuition: every family that reached their sales goal shared in the program's profits, and like many families, we used this rebate to help pay our monthly tuition bill. I became the program coordinator about 5 or 6 years ago, and I still feel very strongly about Scrip and about Catholic education.

When St. Francis was closed by the Diocese, we all learned that tuition—a sacrifice for any Catholic school family—was even higher outside the City of Tonawanda. It was a huge blessing when Fr. Mike decided to keep the Scrip program running in order to subsidize a scholarship program so the families could keep their children in faith-based schools even though we now faced an even greater financial burden. Many families, our own included, would have had to seriously consider public schools without this assistance.

Every family receiving aid helps staff the program and, to me, this is a small way to return the gift that Scrip and the “Children’s Future Fund at St. Francis” (the “official name” of the entire financial aid program) has provided our family. I’ve always believed that when people work together toward a common goal, that is when they build a real community, and it is the St. Francis community that has carried us through difficult times like the closing of the school. I can’t tell you all how deeply I appreciate the parishioners who buy scrip and otherwise help out with the program. They inspire me to continue to do whatever I can for the success of the program, so that other families down the road might also experience these blessings—of community as well as financial aid—and their children will see Catholic faith in action.”



Julie Blanchard is the mother of two girls who attended St. Francis School. She writes an open letter to alumni. “I hope this letter finds you well. First let me start by saying, thank you for your generosity. My name is Julie and I’m blessed to have two beautiful, well rounded and kind daughters. I am very proud of them. We are active parishioners of St Francis and my girls serve as altar servers. Both of my girls attended St. Francis School and I worked at St. Francis when it was announced that the school would close in June 2014; we were completely devastated. My girls were in 4th and 2nd grade and it was heartbreaking for all of us. The girls lost their school and I lost my job. July of 2014 wasn’t much better when their dad suddenly passed away.

Father Mike was and is our saving grace when he announced his commitment to find a way for children to continue their Catholic education. As president of the Home School Association during the last few years the school was open I got to work closely with Father Mike. I was inspired by his commitment to providing a Catholic education for our families. He suggested we contribute the proceeds from the annual Spaghetti Dinner, which historically was held to celebrate Catholic Schools Week, to the tuition assistance fund. I was thrilled and accepted his offer to chair the event.

My girls now attend St. Amelia’s School and this fall they will be entering 6th and 8th grade. I was blessed to have been offered a job there as well, working in Pre-K 3.

Without the support from all of you I could never afford to continue to provide a Catholic education for my girls. The two of them are very spiritual and have a strong faith. Truthfully speaking, I am amazed at just how faithful they are, always looking to Jesus for the answers to the questions in their lives. That is a small example of the foundation and values you are helping me instill in my daughters through your generous monetary donations.

My oldest daughter excelled in religion with a grade of 99.8. She finished the school year 3rd in her class and 5th out of all middle school students. She received the St. Amelia (highest award) and Core Character awards. My youngest daughter held a 93 average the entire year and scored 100 on her religion exam and also received the religion award.

Honestly, I cannot thank you enough for allowing my girls a path to a bright future, where they will always care what Jesus thinks of their words and actions. PS: they said to tell you “Thank you, they couldn’t do it without your help.”



Rosa and Chuck DeRose are parents of two sons who attended St. Francis School. Rosa helps with Scrip program, selling Scrip after weekend masses. She also helps with the Spaghetti Dinner as part of her service to “earn” tuition assistance.

Rosa shares a few of her thoughts about tuition assistance. “Words can’t express the sincere appreciation and gratitude I have for the availability of the St. Francis of Assisi Tuition Assistance Fund that we have been fortunate enough to have been beneficiaries. Both of our sons began their education with the St. Francis School Pre-K 4 program; our older son starting in 2004. Our eldest graduated in 2014, the last graduating class, and my youngest completed 5th grade before the school was closed.

What attracted me to St. Francis School was the overall daily structure, the strong academic programs and religious instruction. Their education was presented in an environment that promoted mutual respect for others that is not always the case in a public school system. Without the help of the St. Francis Tuition Fund & BISON Scholarship Fund we would not have been financially able to provide our boys with a Catholic education for all those years. I am happy to say that with the assistance fund, our youngest son was able to continue his Catholic education and graduated from the 8th Grade this past June.

Funds have always been tight at our home and, although I can’t personally give back financially, I hope and pray my sons will be in a position in the future to give back to St. Francis of Assisi Parish as alumni to others in need. On behalf of my family I send out a big “Thank You” and ask you continue your generous giving so that other children can benefit from a Catholic education as mine did.”

St. Francis Welcomes Summit Center



Most people are unaware of the blessing that Summit Educational Resources is to St. Francis of Assisi Parish. Summit is an organization that provides services for individuals with developmental disabilities or those that have behavior challenges. The S.T.E.P.S. (Success Through Engagement and Positive Support) program is a highly individualized, community-based program for adults operated by Summit. S.T.E.P.S. offers participants the opportunities to volunteer for community organizations, engage in leisure activities and develop vocational skills that interest them. With positive support from a highly trained, professional staff, the overall goal of the program is to help participants become more engaged and integrated in their community. It is one of the newest programs for adults with autism in Western NY.

Summit occupies two former classrooms in the St. Clare Center (Broad Street School) and operates year round Monday-Friday. Up to 12 adults are served by a staff of 10 trainers and specialists.

On a recent morning the staff and Summit adults gathered in the classroom to plan their day. Several activities were listed on the board and one-by-one each individual volunteered to perform 2 tasks for that day. The options listed included watering and weeding the grounds, cleaning the community meeting room and stairs or working in the Food Pantry. Each person was encouraged to show independence in making their selection and clearly communicating with other members of their work group as they approached the board, selected and signed their name to the task of their choice.

They perform a myriad of tasks at the parish: organizing and packaging in the Food Pantry and interacting with Food Pantry clients; making soup and casseroles for the Stone Soup Suppers and setting up the dining room and tables; cleaning the church, chapel and rectory; weeding and watering the gardens on the parish grounds (right) and making the most delicious cookies which they sell at the Summit Center and share with St. Francis staff.

Helping with the Christmas gift distribution is a favorite activity. The Summit adults carry packages to the clients' cars and have an opportunity to practice their social and verbal skills. The Summit staff reinforces the fact that the distribution of food and helping with the Christmas gifts teaches the adults that they can help others, that their help is needed and they are providing a service to others.

It is not all work for the Summit adults. There is time built in to their days to enjoy a basketball game in the ECC gym or get out into the community for other enjoyable outings.

Deb Kowalik, the supervisor of the program at St. Francis, says they have found St. Francis Parish to be a very welcoming and giving community. There are plenty of opportunities for the Summit adults to practice their life-skills and hone their social and verbal interactions with a variety of people. The adults in the S.T.E.P.S. also volunteer at the Salvation Army and are looking for another church in which to locate another group. We of St. Francis parish are grateful for their presence and the wonderful help they provide to the parish.

