

Divine Mercy Unique School in Saint John

By

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Establishing an educational institution takes an incredible amount of time, resources, will power and determination. A small but inspired group of parents in our community came together in 2000 with the conviction that it was in the best interest of their children's total development and they persevered. Today an impressive facility, Divine Mercy Catholic School, (DMCS) serving over 80 young people of all faiths, from preschoolers to grade 8, awaits their return this fall in a tranquil park-like setting with a view of the St. John River. "The little school with a big heart" now has a permanent home at 30 Douglas Street, the former Redemptorist Order's rectory, now owned by the Diocese of Saint John, adjacent to St. Peter's Church. With spacious airy rooms on four floors, it has lots of space for classes, music (Choir and Ukelele Band), physical education, library, drama and afterschool clubs including enriched art, math and a chapel for religious services.

What makes the strongest impression is the young students themselves who are its best advertisement. Neatly dressed in a school uniform, they are well-spoken, happy, polite and considerate of one another. They have the benefit of small class sizes and individual attention while being offered a curriculum which meets Provincial standards imbued with Christian values in a positive learning environment. Some travel from Grand Bay, Hampton and the Kingston Peninsula to benefit from what the school has to offer.

"What makes DMCS unique is its small size, its caring, Christian environment and its dedication to strong academics at all grade levels. The beauty of DMCS lies in the fact that the well-being of the whole child is first and foremost. With the firm belief that children are complex: body, mind and spirit and that they need to be nurtured and educated in all three of these ways, DMCS strives to provide a balanced milieu where each child is valued, challenged and enriched" states Judy Burnham, the school's Principal. A staff of 5 dedicated teachers, many devoted volunteers and a Board of Directors who believe in maintaining the original vision of the school, work diligently to create a safe, family-like environment of respect and charity. Some grateful parents have chosen DMCS when they seek refuge from bullying their children have experienced.

Gym classes, outdoor play and sports teams help build muscles, good sportsmanship and leadership skills among the students. Cross Country meets, hockey, rugby, basketball and soccer teams, swimming and ski trips all add to the character and excitement of DMCS as students work and play together, developing lifelong friendships.

A distinguishing characteristic of DMCS, is that its students are taught to look beyond themselves to help those in need. Visits to the Ridgewood Veteran's Wing, a skate-a-thon fundraiser to help orphaned children in Africa, a bake sale for medical supplies in Haiti, water wells and a classroom in India, support of their World Vision child and a baby shower for unwed mothers are just a few of their recent endeavours. Students learn the dignity of each person and the value of reaching out to those in need.

The school is funded by donations and tuitions, which are kept as low as possible so that the school can be accessible to families of all socio-economic backgrounds. With a tuition of \$3700, DMCS ranks among the lowest of tuitions across Canada. In spite of its gleaming hardwood floors and boasting an elevator and smartboards in every classroom, a \$300,000 capital campaign for added building and grounds improvements is needed. Led by Brian Dobbelsteyn, Bruce Bell, Judy Burnham, Debbie and Jonathan Cann, it will serve its growing enrolment. The playground they are planning will serve the neighbouring North End community and has been bolstered by a donation from the Greater Saint John Community Foundation.

This fall DMCS will begin a preschool program 5 mornings a week for ages 3-5. "Our spacious, colourful classroom contains a variety of learning centers for children to develop a sense of wonder and appreciation for

their natural world and will focus on nurturing the development of preschool children along with kindergarten readiness . Our goal is to offer a full 1/2 day structured program accessible to all, to enhance each child's emotional, social, intellectual and physical development" says Deborah Cann, one of DMCS' administrators and a recent NBCC honours graduate in Early Childhood Education.

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Community Profile is a weekly column highlighting community causes and work done by non-profit organizations in the Greater Saint John area. It is contributed by Jane Barry, executive director of The Greater Saint John Community Foundation. Contact the foundation at 506-672-8880, sjfoundation@nb.aibn.com To view other Community Profiles go to www.saint-john-foundation.nb.ca

Photo: Divine Mercy Catholic School, Saint John's only private school, serves eighty children from preschoolers to grade 8 of all faiths and is growing to meet demands for a school with a safe, family-like environment of respect and charity. Principal Judy Burnham and teacher Deborah Cann join students (clockwise) Liam Cann, Daniel Bell, Matthew Cann and Kennedy McGeachy in the library.

