



# Mustangs News

## Interfaith day

By: Julianne Gonzalez

St. Stephen Catholic School Principal, Linda Umoh, hosted the third annual Interfaith Day on Friday Feb. 8, 2019. Today more than ever, Umoh sees a need to eradicate fear and ignorance among Americans and she believes that Interfaith Day is a strong step in that direction. The St. Stephen Catholic School mission states that we will help our young people, "continue Jesus' mission". We have now ushered more than 400 students through a multi-faith experience over the last three years and we look forward to continuing and growing the tradition.

St. Stephen's reached out to eight (8) area schools of Christian, Islamic and Jewish faiths. The three that accepted the invitation, The Community Day School of Sarasota (Jewish), The Universal Academy of Florida (Islamic) and The American Youth Academy (Islamic) have been our partners in this venture since the inaugural year of the program. The other five schools did not state their reason for declining the invitation or simply did not respond. In total, the guest list included 118 eighth grade students: Islamic (86), Jewish (9) and Catholic (23).

The next step was to prepare our community for the event. A letter was sent home to parents explaining the purpose of Interfaith Day. Mrs. Umoh's letter opened with, "Xenophobia is the fear of the unfamiliar. It is that fear that leads to most prejudices that people have toward one another. The only way to fight prejudice and discrimination is through education to dispel untruths and release ourselves from fear." Our vision was accepted by our school parents and the positive energy surrounding the event began to spread. Gonzalez shared with the guest schools the steps that St. Stephen was taking to prepare the community for Interfaith Day so that they could also prepare their communities for this positive encounter.



On Friday, February 8, 2019, St. Stephen Catholic School opened the doors of the Family Life Center and welcomed their interfaith guests. Many students entered with smiles and some with a trace of hesitation on their faces. After Gonzalez warmly welcomed the schools, the Taoist Tai Chi Society from Brandon began the day with a historical overview of Tai Chi and led a sample class of

movements for all students. In silence, 118 students moved with meditative intention. There were of course some giggles peppered in as they struggled to imitate the relaxed nature of the complex movements.

Following Tai Chi, students from each school educated their peers about their respective faiths. Looking into an audience of middle schoolers donning crucifix jewelry, hijabs and kippahs, the students began to share their scriptures, music, prayers, holy sites, prophets, pillars of religion and misconceptions.

After all the faith presentations, Giving Tree Music Inc. hosted the student highlight of



the day, the drum circle. Students came together through rhythmic drumming led by Paul and "Ish". Laughter, dance, and soul shaking drumming further unified the students as they took turns leading the rhythms and worked together to create one beat.

Students enjoyed lunch together and by this time were trading social media accounts and trying on hijabs provided by Universal Academy. After lunch, the Interfaith panel of religious leaders was the pinnacle of the agenda. Father Dermot Dunne of St. Stephen, Rabbi Michael Werbow, and Imam Mamdouh Elsayed from the Universal Academy of Florida answered questions from the students. At the end of the session, it was clear to the students that Christianity, Judaism, and Islam although distinct from one another share so many similarities. Students finished the day with some athletic games.

Interfaith Day 2019 was a resounding success. A father who chaperoned his child from the Universal Academy of Florida told Gonzalez, "Thank you. Thank you for doing this. Our children need this. Our country needs this." The school administrators and staff thanked Umoh and Gonzalez numerous times for providing the opportunity for their students.

**Unity. Respect. Education. Interfaith.**



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