

Maintaining a Sense of Community

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Since St. Lawrence Seminary is a residential high school in Mt. Calvary, the student body has a keen understanding of community. Simply, community means 160 years of family tradition. The task for staff and teachers was how to maintain that feeling when school is closed, and students are living around the world.

Andrea School, admissions and marketing coordinator, knew they couldn't keep student spirit high with the usual parades, yard signs or other local celebratory efforts; they had to get creative with video skits, games and posters.

Throughout the week leading up to the 113th field day, where fraternities compete in games, SLS celebrated its seniors through social media.

"Brotherhood has been a strong theme at SLS and will continue for these seniors, even though the end of their high school years diverged from tradition; in some ways, this shared experience has united these young men more than any other previous class," said School. "On Sunday, May 17, SLS published to social media videos of the graduation Mass and ceremony. With lots of planning and coordination among parents and staff members, video submissions were montaged together to create a graduation ceremony that still contains awards, valedictorian speech, senior memories, address from the rector, crossing over of tassels, processions, and the final celebration of the hat toss."

To maintain their close-knit atmosphere St. Eugene School in Fox Point created Zoom class meetings for their 3K through eighth-grade students and created a Facebook page for parents and teachers to connect, said Emily Fleisch, recruitment and marketing director.

"We offer virtual weekly one-on-one or small group meetings with teachers and students, dress up days, and we had a parade of teachers and staff to recognize eighth graders and deliver yard signs," she said. "We honored graduates on social media during morning announcement."

Teacher Appreciation Month included home and school members working to honor the teachers in many different ways, including making a joke video, a thank-you video, a "spiritual bouquet" video, and a parade at the school to present them with yard signs



▲ The Grebe children, Jason, Miles and Macy, received a Grande Egg from Grande Cheese Company just in time for Easter. They are students at St. Mary's Springs Academy in Fond du Lac. (Submitted photo)

When Milwaukee's St. Thomas More High School staff thought about virtual learning, they expected to use it during a snow emergency, not long-term during a lengthy shutdown. While teachers quickly adapted to the nuances of virtual teaching, keeping students connected to the school during this time was another challenge entirely.

Though it doesn't take the place of personal interaction, virtual learning through platforms such as Zoom, and other video-calling programs help students maintain a social connection to the school community.

"I think the hardest parts are learning the technology and missing all my friends," senior Sierra Cruz said. "But the best part has been (virtually) spending time with my friends during lunch and just being able to talk to them and share in this experience."

Teachers offer small-group discussions and office hours; student services are staying in touch with students to let them know they are thinking of them and providing ideas for students to pass the time.

"What makes this transition easier is our student body," said principal Nicholas Kelly. "They are kind, patient, and resilient, and are communicating with us to help improve our processes to fit their needs. St. Thomas More students, teachers, staff, parents and administrators are all working together to make the best of this unfortunate situation."

Staff at St. Mary's Springs Academy, a pre-K through 12 school in Fond du Lac, developed a number of activities to help students feel part of the school community, including a contest to win a 22-pound chocolate egg, donated by Grande Cheese Company.

"We reached out to our Ledger families asking them to post their favorite Easter memories, pictures, traditions, etc. Each post was entered into a drawing to win the 22-pound egg. We had 46 entries in the contest," said Chelsea McKay, marketing coordinator. "The winner was chosen randomly on Wednesday, April 8, and the egg was delivered to the winner's door step the afternoon of Thursday, April 9, just in time to be enjoyed on Easter."

Other activities included "38 Days of Springs," a Facebook photo campaign designed to be a "look back on the Ledge" as a countdown to summer. Photos taken during the year and shout-outs to students receiving awards or scholarships are included. Students also created Easter cards for nursing homes and showcased seniors on the school's Facebook page.

After maneuvering into virtual instruction, St. Josaphat Parish School staff recognized the need to hold tight to the faith and each other during uncertain times. Utilizing external social media platforms, Principal Karin Strasser said they've shared daily school updates with families while encouraging them to become active participants in creating the school's unique virtual story. Some examples include a weekly flipgrid contest that rewards students for posting miss you moments on a virtual bulletin board, a Mother's Day shout-out and May Crowning rosary.

"Using technology to touch the human heart seems counterintuitive at times, but it really does work," said Strasser. "Through these efforts, we demonstrate that school is more than teaching. Whatever comes our way, SJPS staff will passionately support our school families, in any capacity – as we stand together in truth and spirit."