



# THE QUEST

**At Saint Stephen's, each school year ends with students and teachers on a journey for new learning experiences that reach beyond the classroom.**

By David Glaser

While those who study education and speculate about its future don't agree on everything, there seem to be certain threads common among them. When it comes to how schools will deliver their product, the consensus is that education will become more personalized and won't be held by the typical four-walled classroom.

At Saint Stephen's, the flavor of this kind of experiential, non-traditional learning has been part of the recipe for years. It's called Interim Quest or "IQ," and it provides a tasty finish to each school year.

In the Middle School, a student stands before his classmates holding an odd-looking, cardboard device that seems strangely familiar. He's spent part of his week learning about, dissecting, and recreating the makeshift air filtration device that saved the lives of the Apollo 13 astronauts and was made famous in the 1995 film starring Tom Hanks.

Walk into the Lower School and each classroom has been transformed. One resembles a planetarium with colorful models of the planets in the solar system dangling from the ceiling tiles. Another is adorned with the Olympic rings and flags of competing countries. Students are gathered on the floor while scenes from equestrian events are projected onto the wall. Enter the blacked out doors at the end of the hall and pajama-clad kindergartners are huddled in a darkened room, learning about the habits of nocturnal animals.

Intermediate School students are on the move all week throughout the Tampa Bay area, visiting the Florida Aquarium, Thomas Edison Estate in Fort Myers, Mote Marine Laboratory, Tampa Bay History Center, and Museum of Science and Industry.

IQ reaches its peak in the Upper School, where students are presented a menu of options including skill building, personal improvement, externships with local professionals, community service, and travel abroad.

In 2017, the offerings included instruction on cooking, playwriting, yoga, SCUBA, and fitness, as well as shadowing opportunities with area attorneys, physicians, veterinarians, and even a personal trainer. Overseas travel played a large role. Students journeyed to Japan for the first time to visit Saint Stephen's sister school in Tokyo (Shibuya High School), made service trips to Nicaragua and Haiti, and traveled with Marine Science teacher Cris Skey to explore the waters of the Bahamas.

"It's an opportunity to do what we can't do during the school year and gets the kids out of the classroom," said faculty member Anna Conn, who coordinates IQ in the Upper School. "We encourage the students to leave their comfort zone and try something new."

The program – then literally called "the May Program" – was introduced at Saint Stephen's in 1987 by former head of school John Howard. He brought the idea with him from a previous institution as a way for teachers to create programs that share their personal passions and engage students. This type of experiential learning sparks critical thinking, problem solving, and decision-making skills. It goes beyond theories taught in the classroom. When students have first-hand involvement in solving a problem or executing an activity, they're more likely to take ownership.

While travel and field experiences are common, experiential learning doesn't require that students leave the classroom. Instead of lectures that transfer knowledge to be recited back on an exam, the teacher takes the role of a guide, moving students through the process of learning, providing information and resources as needed.

"During IQ week, our children are immersed in lessons and activities that go beyond daily classroom curriculum," Lower School Assistant Director Luci Hartmann said. "The learning environments are transformed and students are given experience with specialized materials. The week culminates with presentations that showcase what they've learned."

Over the years, the nature of IQ at Saint Stephen's has evolved to reflect the direction provided by the leadership in each division. At times it has been primarily community service-oriented. Other years have been heavy on travel. Teachers have their own favorites and are encouraged to re-imagine their programs. New teachers bring their own, fresh perspectives.

"It's really an example of innovation and an opportunity for learning beyond the four walls. It also can be in keeping with what we do during the rest of the school year encouraging cross-departmental curriculum," Head of School Dr. Jan Pullen said. "One day you may be using engineering skills to build a robot, and the next you're working with art to decorate it."

"My favorite part is that it works within our mission to create a love of learning. It's nice that the children are able to finish the school year not thinking about page 97 in a math book and grades. I love it when I hear from them that they hate to see it end."