

THE PARISH POST

SPRING 2016 • parishschool.org

COWBOY BOOTS ~ SOUTHERN ROOTS GALA RAISES NEARLY \$300,000 FOR THE PARISH SCHOOL



Nearly 400 guests donned boots, jeans and cowboy hats for The Parish School's 23rd annual gala, "Cowboy Boots ~ Southern Roots," held at the Red Oak Ballroom in CityCentre on January 29. The first-ever sold out event raised \$280,000 to support the school's robust academic and financial aid programs.

Chairs Lizzie and Stephen Clarke and Whitney and Eric Holzer hosted the school's most successful gala in the history of The Parish School. This year's southern-style event featured a trick roper, a mechanical bull, the Earl Sanders Jr. Band and Miss Houston-Harris County Rodeo royalty, Faith Schmidt.

Each year, The Parish School gala honors individuals who exemplify the values of The Parish School with The Golden Oak Award. This year, the award went to Christine and J.B. Duncan, two incredibly active alumni parents who continue to advocate for The Parish School and for children with language and learning delays and disorders. Christine and J.B. have witnessed first-hand how the specialized needs of each student are met and what a difference the school makes in children's lives.

Libations flowed while guests browsed more than 60 silent auction lots, donated by Parish School parents, staff and community supporters. Hot auction items included a Gucci bag, Houston Rockets tickets, handmade boots and an earring set from one of Houston's most notable jewelers, Tenenbaum Classic Jewelers.

The live auction, held while attendees enjoyed southern style biscuits and a chicken dinner, added a level of excitement to the evening. The Santa Fe, N.M., trip and luxurious accommodations package ended in a heated bidding war. But everyone went home happy as guests had multiple opportunities to bid on four other fabulous live auction items, enter a three-winner raffle and play Heads or Tails.

Additionally, guests were inspired by a special video presentation contributed by McNee Productions, featuring Parish School students performing Rachel Platten's "Fight Song" which may be viewed at <https://youtu.be/suIWbB7ulxg>.

The real winners of the evening were the children and families whose lives will be forever transformed thanks to the generosity of the sponsors and underwriters.



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THE PARISH SCHOOL

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ALUMNI:

We want to hear from you!

Keep us updated with your contact information and life happenings. Please share your news with us at info@parishschool.org.

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713-467-4696

parishschool.org

OUR MISSION

To identify, educate and empower children who have language and learning differences.

OUR VISION

The Parish School will be the model educational and training facility serving children who have language and learning differences.

Administrative Team

Nancy Bewley, MAT, CCC-SLP
Head of School

Wendy Airlie, CPA, CIA
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SAVE THE DATE:

Margaret Noecker
Nature Center Walk Around
April 22, 2016 at 7:00 p.m.

Parent & Volunteer
Appreciation Breakfast
April 27, 2016 at 9:15 a.m.

Last Day of School
May 26, 2016

Camp Acorn
Summer Camp at Parish!
June 7 – July 1

Parish School Fall Luncheon
October 11, 2016 at 11:30 a.m.

Parish School Gala
January 2017
Chairs:
Rachel & Adam Dunn,
Suzanne & Trey Martin and
Afis & Nichole Olajuwon

The Parish Post is printed two times a year and is published by The Parish School for students, parents, alumni and friends. Photo credit: Parish Staff and Chris Spicks.
For information or questions regarding The Parish Post, please contact
Amanda Arnold – aarnold@parishschool.org.



FROM THE HEAD OF SCHOOL

Nancy Bewley, MAT, CCC-SLP

Thinking Strategically, Accomplishing Much

Everyone at The Parish School focuses daily on our mission. Our number one priority is to identify, educate and empower children who have language and learning differences. According to the Institute of Medicine, language impairments affect as many as 16% of U.S. children. These deficiencies often increase the risk of developing other disorders, disabilities and academic struggles. This is where The Parish School comes in! Treating these communication issues early, in a language-rich environment, substantially increases positive outcomes for these children (National Institutes of Health). The Parish School helps children discover their strengths and build on areas that are a struggle, while supporting each child as they reach their potential. We offer an educational experience where children, families, staff and faculty thrive and feel a deep satisfaction and enthusiasm in accomplishing our mission.

Since February 2015 The Parish School Board of Trustees, senior administrative staff and I have concentrated our efforts on completing the first year of a six-year strategic plan. Committees were formed, information gathered, data analyzed and plans developed, with many goals accomplished during the past 14 months.

For our families, parents were surveyed regarding interest in expanding our afterschool care program and student transportation. I am pleased to announce we are offering an expansion of our current extended day for both preschool and elementary students beginning August 2016. With the expansion of our afterschool program, transportation needs may be reduced, and we will re-evaluate next year.

We know professional development is directly correlated to increased student performance and organizational health. Therefore, we have revised our performance assessment tools to encourage staff and faculty to pursue even more professional growth. The more we invest in our teachers, the more our teachers invest in our students!

In the area of operations and administration, a three-year technology plan has been developed to keep pace with our ever-increasing digital world. We are assessing our infrastructure needs and investigating how we might electronically manage student information.

The marketing committee also has been busy. This past year The Parish School launched a successful Speakers Bureau that provides educational sessions—free of charge—to community, professional and school groups throughout Houston. Nearly 300 more people now know about the amazing opportunities on our campus and at The Carruth Center. Additionally, we debuted a new promotional video at the annual gala highlighting our students' resilience and the uniqueness of The Parish School's learning environment. View it at youtu.be/sulWBb7ulxg. Lastly, be sure to check out our updated website, which will launch for the 2016-17 school year!

The Board of Trustees completed a strategic board member assessment and identified steps for strengthening our volunteer leadership, which includes an emphasis on board development for the coming year. Several members of our Board of Trustees completed a comprehensive revision of our bylaws. We also transitioned to a new Board President, Steven Gordon. Steven has been a faithful and active board member since 2006, he has served as Treasurer, member of the Grounds and Maintenance Committee, as well as the Executive Committee. (See Steven's message on this page.)

The Margaret Noecker Nature Center Council has been strategically putting ideas into action for the benefit of current and future students. The conceptual design of the center has been published and received much acclaim. Three areas were selected for the first phase of development, and landscape architects are in the process of creating the schematic design of these areas. The design will be unveiled on Friday evening April 22, 2016 during the Nature Center's Earth Day Walk Around. Naming opportunities will be available. You won't want to miss this event!

Moving Forward...

While we have many ongoing goals, the most important endeavor continues to be to serve children who have language and learning delays and disorders. To best meet the needs of our community, The Parish School will focus on the following:

- Community awareness: With a stronger emphasis on how The Parish School is marketed to the community and potential families, the marketing committee is redesigning the website, admissions materials and will continue seeking Speakers Bureau opportunities.
- Possibility of expanding grade levels: The Parish School will collaborate with its current

and future families to evaluate the demand and feasibility for a middle school program, grade levels 6 – 8.

- Potential campus expansion: As we consider adding a middle school program, we will review our current facilities and develop a master plan for expansion of our current campus. Our beautiful 17-acre campus has plenty of room to grow and we look forward to this possibility.

This is an exciting time for our team; I envision significant growth on the horizon for The Parish School. The foundational ideals of creativity, community, passion, potential and people that Robbin Parish championed in 1983 continue to be deeply engrained in our school culture. Scores of lives have been changed by these beliefs, and I have no doubt that these values will continue to inspire all of us moving forward.



LETTER FROM OUR BOARD PRESIDENT

Steven Gordon

Do you remember the details of your first visit to The Parish School? I do – in vivid detail. This is unusual because, to be honest, the last eighteen years just seem like a blur. It was a November morning in 1998. We entered a temporary building on the old Parish campus and waited in a dark foyer that also served as a hallway. As the entire school seemed to pass by at hyper-speed, my wife and I clenched each other's hands wondering how this could be the right place for our child.

We came to The Parish School through a head of school referral and carried as much fear, anxiety and guilt as any young couple could possibly carry. We had scheduled meetings with Melanie Seigle (former Director of Admissions), Margaret Noecker (late Head of School) and Robbin Parish (late founder). If you are new to Parish, this was the equivalent of getting

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Letter from Our Board President, Continued from page 3

an audience with the “dream team.” Within two hours, our meetings were over; we had a plan in place, our nerves were settled, and we experienced joyous relief in knowing there was a school in Houston that could support our daughter, Shelly.

From that day forward our lives were transformed.

While it may seem strange to outsiders that Parish and Carruth parents often tear up when telling their stories, it also happens on a regular basis at our bi-monthly Parish Board of Trustees meetings. We start every meeting with a student “success story” presented by a staff member, teacher or parent. What an uplifting and appropriate way to start a meeting! While the outcomes of each story may differ, and the paths to success are all unique, we get to experience the “transformation.” And it is powerful.

Your Board of Trustees continues to focus on the long-term strategic plan that was approved by the board in February 2015. As we embark on the second year of a multi-year plan, we follow a carefully constructed and detailed roadmap of topics that explore and focus on enhancing the management, governance, marketing and finance of our school. If not for the valuable input of Nancy Bewley, and the visionary leadership of our past board president, Laurie Gutierrez, we never would have embarked on this transformative quest.

As I begin my first year as board president, I can't help but reflect on Laurie's excellent guidance. Laurie's unwavering leadership proved to be indispensable when suddenly we faced the tragic loss of our beloved former Head of School, Margaret Noecker. Laurie was also instrumental in providing support for the successful transition of our new Head of School. She implemented the adoption of updated Board of Trustees bylaws, created new investment policies, encouraged outreach marketing, and now chairs our Board Development Committee. Beginning her seventh year on the board, Laurie now serves as our board secretary. On behalf of the Board of Trustees, staff and faculty, we express our gratitude for Laurie's exemplary service, commitment to our children and the success of The Parish School.

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UPDATES ON OUR ELEMENTARY PROGRAM

Amy Richard, Director of Elementary

The 2015-2016 school year at The Parish School has been an exciting one, especially for our elementary program. We are keeping pace with the Texas Education Agency in revising our curriculum to map with the revisions made to the TEKS (Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills).

While the state guidelines have changed, and in some ways have become more challenging, our brilliant teachers, speech-language pathologists, and paraeducators at The Parish School continue to find new ways to implement these standards in multi-sensory, creative and innovative ways.

When you peek in our elementary classrooms, you may see children learning about money by engaging in hands-on activities and opening their own businesses. You may also see children utilizing a tool The Parish School developed called the "Describing Machine" to help them include specific language in describing what they brought for "show and share." Children are learning about stored energy in science by creating rubber band cars and seeing how far they can travel. Children are also using iPads and computers to organize their thoughts and ideas for written expression.

Our exceptional instructional staff are able to successfully implement the state-established standards each day, while also spending time working with children to develop solid communication, problem solving, self-advocacy and executive functioning skills. In addition, our teachers work to help students develop strategies to become independent, socially competent and resilient learners. The combination of academics along with all of the other critical skills that children need to be successful is what makes The Parish School a magical place for children to learn.

PHOTO ROUND UP



PHOTO ROUND UP



MARGARET NOECKER NATURE CENTER BECOMES PART OF THE PARISH SCHOOL STRATEGIC VISION

The Margaret Noecker Nature Center (MNNC) is moving forward in a big way. We've just seen the landscape design plans submitted by TBG Partners, and we are overwhelmed! With these amazing plans in hand, and a serious fundraising campaign on the runway, we're ready to launch into phase one of the project, which includes "Margaret's Nature Hub" as the centerpiece; a re-designed toddler playground, "Little Acorn Park;" and an improved preschool playground, "Oak River Exploration Zone."

TBG, headquartered in Austin, is globally renowned for its outdoor environments and nature play areas, from Katy to Qatar. Working in consultation with the Natural Learning Initiative, TBG has wonderfully captured the vision and ambitions of the MNNC's nature learning program.

To celebrate the kickoff of phase one, this year's Earth Day party will be special. We'll be hosting parents, donors, potential sponsors and friends of The Parish School at a party right here in Margaret's Nature Hub, where we'll unveil the Nature Center design plans. We're happy to announce that we've invited inspirational Houston vocalist Ken Gayle to perform. We're thrilled that we're able to package all of this into our 2016 event, and we hope you'll join us at the Margaret Noecker Nature Center Walk Around, Friday, April 22, from 7:00 – 9:00 p.m.

In other news: Our February MNNC Project of the Month was an Outdoor Art Center. Art therapist Chantel McAhren created an exploration area where our children can use their creativity to incorporate nature into their artistic endeavors. It's truly a space where imagination can bloom.

Other enrichment programs on our slate include a series of plexiglass planters, handmade by our environmental and enrichment educator, Amy

Myers. We're expanding our butterfly garden by preparing soil and adding plant variety to attract more and different species of butterflies, and creating a succulent "fairy garden," with a skit as a learning platform. Other projects we're excited about include a dirt-digging garden, hummingbird habitats, an improved up-cycle garden, and a medicinal garden where our kids learn how to identify and safely handle plants and herbs.

Our newly implemented environmental education classes are growing in popularity; children love hiking and identifying animal tracks around the school, and are creating a bear den and a child-size bird nest utilizing logs, sticks and twigs found on our campus.

The Parish School will bring Nature Explore, a Nebraska-based collaborative that connects children with nature, to the campus this fall. Nature Explore will train our full staff on how to expand and imbed nature learning across our curriculum. Teachers will follow this experience with a second inservice, led by playworker Jill Wood, on how to interact with children and allow child-driven play in a natural setting.

Our spirits are flying, beginning this new season with the promise of real growth on the horizon! We're grateful for your continuing support in developing the imaginations and creativity of our kids through nature-based learning.

We can't wait to welcome you to the MNNC Walk Around so you can share our excitement. We know you'll be as knocked-out as we are when you see the plans for phase one. Please mark your calendars for April 22, 7:00 – 9:00 p.m. at Margaret's Nature Hub on The Parish School campus. RSVP to nmosley@parishschool.org.





STAFF SPOTLIGHT: MORGAN LEICHTER-SAXBY, VISITING PLAYWORKER

The Parish School's elementary afterschool program, Adventure Playground, is thrilled to have visiting playworker, Morgan Leichter-Saxby working and researching on-site this spring. Morgan is co-founder of the nonprofit, Pop-Up Adventure Play, and has recently completed a world speaking and training tour with her organization. She is currently a Ph.D. candidate at Leeds Beckett University, in Leeds, U.K. We asked her a few questions about her studies and what brought her to Houston:

Welcome to Houston, Morgan! Can you tell us a little about your research?

Hello! Thank you for having me – I'm so thrilled to be here at Parish.

I'm here doing fieldwork for my Ph.D. in Playwork. Playwork is a professional practice developed on adventure playgrounds in the U.K. since World War II. My research draws from observations and reflective practice, which are both central to playwork. What particularly interests me is the relationship between our personal and professional selves, and how we reconcile those two while supporting children's play.

As playworkers, we need to be careful not to impose our own prejudices or agendas onto children's play. That's called 'adulteration' and we work hard to avoid it. At the same time, we're human and have certain soft spots and trigger points. I'm looking at those moments when we feel challenged by what's happening during play, or when we're working from a deep intuitive sense. Where do those feelings come from and how do we use them to inform our practice without dominating it?

Why The Parish School?

There are hundreds of adventure playgrounds in Western Europe, the U.K. and Japan, but I really wanted to work in the U.S. There have been a small number of adventure playgrounds in the states since the idea developed in the 1930s, but it never gained the momentum that it did elsewhere. Today, there are only a handful of sites in the U.S.—some decades old and some very new—and they're getting lots of attention! Adventure playgrounds encourage a nuanced understanding of risk and children's abilities, which people are starting to rethink in the U.S.

With that in mind, I chose to study and work at The Parish School because it's an adventure playground site of extraordinarily good practice. It's the only one I know of, anywhere in the world, that is located in a school. That's fascinating for me! But more importantly, it was built on a foundation of original documents from the early days of adventure play, without the decades of compromise that we've been struggling to correct in the U.K. That's beautiful.

At the same time, The Parish School's Adventure Playground (AP) is 8 years old and that makes it the oldest of the "new wave" of adventure playgrounds in this country. There's a solid dynamic of playwork within the Parish AP team, which is something else that I needed for my research. To get the best of my fieldwork, I needed to know that I'd be on a site that allows children the freedom to explore, experiment and play, but also gives staff members space to build deep relationships of trust and permission with the children and one another.

You are also here as a visiting playworker. What does that entail?

It means that I'm out on both Adventure Playground and the elementary recess playground, Monday through Thursday, to support the children's play!

At recess, we've been bringing materials such as fabric, buckets, pool noodles and cardboard boxes onto the playground to give a small taste of adventure play, but one better suited to the short time frame of 30 minutes. To help extend that work throughout Parish, I've held trainings in playwork with paraeducators and teachers and delivered a talk for parents.

It also means that I help record some of what happens on both sites—tracing conversations and trainings with staff and making observations about what these changes have meant in the play and school experiences of Parish children. We are gathering data for a study on the relative safety records of both the fixed equipment playground and Adventure Playground, which we're going to present at the U.S. Play Coalition Conference at Clemson University this month.

How does this fit in with your other work?

While I'm here, I'm still part of Pop-Up Adventure Play and a tutor on our online Playworker Development Course. Our training course has about 160 students in 17 countries around the world, so it keeps me busy!

What has been your favorite experience at Parish?

Oh, I don't know if I could pick a favorite! I've loved seeing where the materials I have brought to recess end up, like when the children buried dozens of plastic animals deep in the sandpit. There was also a fantastic game of pulling each other around on the basketball court using pool noodles and scooters. I've also been imprisoned and saved by Jedi knights and installed at least a hundred swings and hammocks. Every day is filled with surprises and humor – these children are amazing!

If you would like to learn more about adventurous play and outdoor environments, Morgan will be speaking at Nature Discovery Center, 7112 Newcastle Street, on Saturday, April 30, from 9:30 a.m. – noon.



MORE THAN **\$40,000** RAISED FOR THE PARISH SCHOOL THROUGH CHEVRON HOUSTON MARATHON

The Parish School ventured out on a chilly Sunday morning to cheer on the 27,000 runners at the Chevron Houston Marathon January 17. Our very own 33-member team included Parish families, staff and supporters who collectively raised over \$40,000 to benefit the school's mission. First-time marathoner and Parish Dad, Daniel Droog, raised over \$17,000 alone and was featured in [The Houston Chronicle](#) and [KPRC Channel 2](#) for his efforts.

Special thanks go out to Joelle Nelson and Helen McCartney (Runner Recruitment), Palmi Testa-Limas (Hoopla Station Coordinator), our generous donors, all our supporters who added to the excitement at our hoopla station, as well as to Insperity and Weatherford, The Parish School's sidewalk squad sponsors.



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If you are interested in running with Team Parish in 2017, please contact us at advancement@parishschool.org.

'GIVING VOICE TO CHILDREN'

FALL LUNCHEON HONORS R.E.A.D. PROGRAM



Hundreds of teachers, parents, volunteers and community supporters turned out to support The Parish School's 8th Annual Fall Luncheon – Giving Voice to Children, chaired by Caroline Serrett, Bree and Chris Walker, and JoAnne and Mike Donovan. This event is held each autumn at the Junior League of Houston, and brings awareness to children with learning and language differences while supporting The Parish School's financial assistance fund.

Helping Parish School students find their voices cannot be accomplished without the help of many strong partners. In recognition of their many years of dedication to improving children's reading and communication skills, we honored Tender Loving K-9's Reading Education Assistance Dogs (R.E.A.D.) program with the 2015 Robbin Parish Award. Reading dogs Dexter and Godiva and their human friends are instrumental in building confidence and success in Parish early literacy programs. Just like The Parish School, R.E.A.D. dogs and their human companions continue to help children find their voices.

The program included recognition of the 2014-15 teacher and paraeducator of the year, Meagan Rosales and Ann Pham; as well as our board member of the year, Steven Gordon. In addition, the always-popular Parish School choir performed.

Keynote speaker, Stephanie Donaldson-Pressman, entertained and educated the audience with user-friendly solutions to everyday challenges facing parents, educators and professionals. Pressman is an internationally recognized family-dynamics expert and author of "The Learning Habit: A Groundbreaking Approach to Homework and Parenting That Helps our Children Succeed in School and Life." As Therapist and Clinical Director of the New England Center for Pediatric Psychology, Stephanie spoke candidly on issues facing all parents amidst changing school landscapes, especially topics directly affecting special-needs families.

Many thanks to our underwriters, supporters and attendees who helped make our Fall Luncheon a success!

UNDERWRITER

Bree & Chris Nelson

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Daniel Lang

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Anonymous

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Caroline Serrett

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THE PARISH SCHOOL

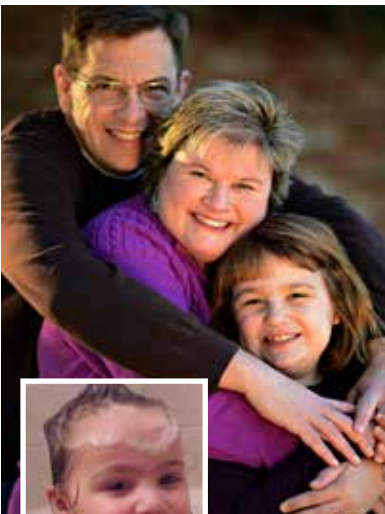
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THE PARISH PERSPECTIVE



MADISON DUNCAN

Former Parish Student 2011 – 2014

During a routine 2-year checkup, Madison Duncan's pediatrician recommended that she be evaluated by a specialist right away. She was found to have numerous delays in multiple areas, most noticeably speech and communication.

At 3 years old, Madison was enrolled at The Parish School. The staff and teachers worked not only with Madison, but with the entire family. Madison was a student at Parish for three years, attended Camp Acorn during the summers and group speech therapy at The Carruth Center.

Parents J.B. and Christine are proud to report that Madison has now found her voice. She is an incredibly confident, social, talkative young lady. She is in first grade at Alexander Elementary in Katy ISD and is reading at a second grade level. She is a member of a Daisy Girl Scout Troop and loves being a top Girl Scout cookie seller. She has many friends, a great sense of humor and an amazing vocabulary. She found her voice in drama, and shows a strong interest in science and animals of all kinds.

"We are so glad we acted early, when she was still so little," said Christine.

"Don't get me wrong, she still has her moments! And we use the techniques and calming methods that we learned from Parish."