St. John's Lutheran School Alumni News

Newsletter 25

The Principal's Perspective

From Student to Teacher: Reagan Birkner Returns to St. John's

It's always hard to narrow down a topic for the Alumni Newsletter, but this time I knew exactly what I wanted to write about: an alumna who returned to St. John's!

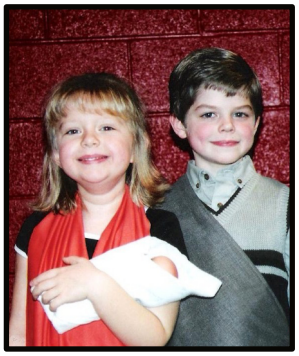
This particular story begins in 2003, when a young Reagan Birkner came to St. John's Lutheran School. She started as an enthusiastic kindergartener who really loved Jump Rope for Heart. I also heard she was always very attentive during "Jesus Time" with Mrs. Schmitz.



Then came first grade, where Reagan continued to grow in faith and love alongside Mrs. Miller and her classmates. She always worked hard to make her teachers happy, and she wanted to do her very best. She even donned an apron for the musical that year and sang at the top of her lungs so everyone could hear God's message.



Second grade brought even more musical education as part of Reagan's journey. Thoughts of pilgrims and Indians remain from her time with Mrs. Liefer. This precious year also included baby Jesus and an epic performance by her of Mary, who helped tell the Christmas story.



Third grade was a time to learn manners and begin using reading skills to learn about the world around her. Subjects started in earnest, and Reagan always did her best, working toward that perfect report card. She listened, learned, and paid close attention to chapel lessons. She was a model student, and Mrs. Koen would have gladly taken a whole class of Reagans!



Fourth grade with Mrs. Kastens meant plenty of novels to read, with Accelerated Reading (AR) as a prime focus. With Reagan at the lead, the class welcomed new students to the class. Fort de Chartres was another great place to explore and learn, and many memories were made down near Prairie du Rocher.



Fifth grade meant Mrs. Letcher and projects aplenty. A love for reading and crafting was gained by many students while in Darlene's class, and Reagan was no exception! She jumped into the many and various projects with all she had



and even managed to hide behind a shovel while the class worked with concrete.

Sixth grade with Mr. Becker held a lot of memories—good and otherwise. Bill went all out with his Western Day and worked to get the kids ready for life on the prairie through his novels. During sixth grade, the students also began playing chimes and became the leaders of chapel,



rather than simply the helpers, under Mr. Becker's direction.

Seventh grade brought another new experience. Mrs. Hines, with her math mind and newly out of college, was a new experience for Reagan and her classmates. Class time was also different because she and her friends got to switch



classes. They had Mrs. Hines for Math, Mrs. Schnepel for History, and Mr. Palm for Science. Sports and other activities kept the students entertained—and likely very busy! Reagan not only showed her fervor for sports, but her spirit as well.

Well, if having me as a basketball coach in seventh grade started our time together, eighth grade only improved it. I remember the kids rejoicing over not having to do a science fair but groaning over their historical figure papers, which were six to twelve pages long. I remember Reagan crafting many projects—some about the solar system, one about the rock cycle, a weather book for third graders, and the beginning of the "Picture Periodic Table." I remember a class that could do the reading, but would much rather talk about it!

I also remember Reagan always having a great attitude and understanding that education was important, even when it meant doing a little extra to help the process along—like volunteering to be in a dunk tank!



After Reagan graduated from St. John's, she remained active in the church and continued participating in Sunday School. Most Sundays, she could be seen sitting in church with her family. She was also a constant presence in Sunday School, serving as either an aide or a teacher. Even then, Reagan showed an affinity for working with little children and sharing God's Word with them.

Then Reagan moved off to college, and as is to be expected, we didn't know as much about her or see as much of her. But God knew what was in her heart and was working behind the scenes to bring her back to St. John's.

In fact, God was bringing her back to fulfill a prophecy she made all the way back in fourth grade, when she told Mrs. Schmitz that someday she was going to take her job! The process may have been a long one and included a few major changes—pun intended—but it ultimately led Reagan right back to St. John's. And we are so blessed to have her back!

Today, Reagan is singing the Jesus songs she has always enjoyed, learning and implementing new curriculum that she trained for over the summer, and, most importantly, sharing God's Word with a new generation of children.



What a blessing it is to watch one of our students grow from an enthusiastic kindergartener into a kindergarten teacher who now has the opportunity to shape the faith and lives of children at the very school where her own journey began!

Welcome home, Reagan!

A Visit With an Alumnus: Nick Mehner

My family's ties to St. John's date back almost 60 years to when my father, Howard Mehner, first attended grade school there. He was followed by several of my aunts and uncles, my mother Sandy (Jacobs) Mehner, and eventually my younger sister Brittany (Mehner) Hollis. As I wrote this article, it was fun reflecting on this history that began long before my own journey from kindergarten through 8th grade. Looking back on those formative years, the following two lessons stand out above the rest

Throughout grade school, I was a spirited child, which often made focusing in a quiet classroom setting a genuine challenge. Most of my classmates likely remember my class clown tendencies, always looking for a quick laugh. These qualities frequently tested the limits of my teachers, parents, and the administrative staff, and on multiple occasions, I found myself enduring the consequences. However, while I didn't fully appreciate it at the time, I am thankful for the incredible pastors and teachers who met my high energy with Christ-like patience and grace. They helped me focus that energy into my education—something that propelled me to the top of my high school class.



State track and field, Chicago 2006

Unlike my peers who lived close enough to walk or be dropped off by family members, I commuted from Waterloo each day. Because several local families shared this situation, a group came together to operate a small school bus. However, extracurricular activities like late practices or away games often meant missing the ride home. Relying on others for transportation offered me an early lesson in Christian fellowship. Without this supportive community, I wouldn't have been able to participate in the athletic program where I made some of my fondest memories competing in state championships for basketball and track and field. Those experiences sparked a lifelong passion for sports, which continues today as I work my way towards participating in an Ironman triathlon.

After graduating from St. John's in 2006 and Waterloo High School in 2010, I earned degrees in Economics and Finance from Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. Today, I live in Waterloo and serve as a technology leader at Edward Jones. While guiding multiple teams through complex challenges, I constantly lean on the moral and spiritual foundation planted during my years at St. John's. I strive to be a servant leader, meeting my teams with the very same grace, patience, and support that my Christian brothers and sisters showed me.



Nick with his girlfriend, Mallory, in Aruba 2026

The hymn "I Am But a Stranger Here" has always stayed with me, serving as a gentle reminder that our time here is only temporary and heaven awaits us at the end of our earthly journey. No matter what life throws at us, we can find solace in prayer, remembering God's promise of eternal life and our reunion with the loved ones who went before us. Keeping God at the center of both our trials and our triumphs brings true purpose to everything we do, whether on the field, in the workplace, or at home. I am profoundly thankful for the Christian foundation St. John's provided me, an anchor that continues to ground my faith and shape the person I am today.





2006 Confirmation Class:
Left to Right: 1st Row: Nickolas Mehner, Kayla Kelley, Jessica Kaaz, Andrew Crowell, Kelsie Schoenbeck, Audrey Mueth, Corey Rahn.
2nd Row: Rev. Rory Seeger, Paige Dilley, Kory Liefer, Jessica Snyder, Chelsea Koester, Joshua Reinhardt, Angela Junge, Rev. Russell Koen.
3rd Row: Brittney Cerny, Kaleb Matzenbacher, Chelsea Schrader, Hunter Beattie, Lora Tindall, Adam Muench, Kristen Baum.

A Visit With an Alumna: Rebecca (Kaaz) Elmshauser

Twenty-nine years ago, before I ever stepped into a classroom at St. John's Lutheran School, St. John's showed up at my front door.

It was the summer of 1998, and my family was preparing for a move. I had spent my childhood living in various places throughout Kansas, Missouri, and Illinois, and this time we were moving from Arenzville, Illinois, to Red Bud. My father had accepted a Call to serve as a 5th grade teacher at St. John's, while my mom, LuAnn, would serve as music director for both the church and school. I was preparing to begin 5th grade in a new place, and my younger sisters (Christine and Jessica) entered 3rd and 1st grade.

Sometime that summer, Mr. Bill Becker arrived at our home in Arenzville. He and his wife, Diana, were also preparing to move to Red Bud, where he had been Called to also teach at St. John's. Since our families were about to become the "new teachers" in town, the Beckers decided to make a trip and introduce themselves. At the time, I certainly had no idea how significant that move, or the people standing at our front door, would become in my life.

Because I came to St. John's in 5th grade, I had only four years there, but those years hold a number of memories. When I think back on my time as a student, it is often the people I remember first. Miss Gulbrandsen (Przybylski), my 6th grade teacher, Miss Wolff (Densmore), my 7th grade teacher, and Mrs. Schneider, my 8th grade teacher, all stand out, as do Pastor Schultz and Pastor Seeger. Athletics were also a significant part of those years, and I have fond memories of playing softball, basketball, volleyball, and running track.



Some memories are tied to the milestones that generations of St. John's students have shared. Our eighth-grade trip to Washington, D.C., was certainly a highlight. Confirmation brought its own set of memories. I vividly recall sitting in the old cafeteria reciting to Pastor Seeger what seemed like endless amounts of memory work. Looking back, however, I recognize how those hours were helping build a foundation of Scripture and faith that would stay with me long after Confirmation day.

Then there are the memories that seemed completely ordinary at the time but somehow have become some of the most nostalgic. I remember walking to school with friends and making trips to MotoMart before practices to stock up on junk food that I would never eat now. And, of course, there was the food crafted by the excellent lunch ladies at St. John's. Hot-roll day was always a good day, and few school-lunch combinations are as permanently etched into my memory as chili and donuts.



Lutheran education has been a constant throughout my life. From kindergarten through a master's degree, I attended Lutheran schools and universities. What began largely as parental influence and a decision to place me in Lutheran schools laid the foundation for my faith becoming my own.

St. John's was an important part of that journey. Academically, I received an education that prepared me well for what came next. Spiritually, religion classes, chapel, and especially Confirmation instruction gave me a foundation for understanding what I believe and why I believe it. However, perhaps the most lasting lesson was also the simplest: we are all sinners in need of a Savior. Our worth does not come from our accomplishments, our "goodness," or what others think of us. In Christ, we are fully known, with all our faults and failures, and still fully loved.

That truth has shaped not only my faith but also the way I approach my vocations and the people God has placed around me. One passage that has become particularly meaningful to me is Colossians 3:23–24:
"Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ."

Those words take on greater meaning for me now than they would have when I was sitting in a St. John's classroom. Education is important. Hard work matters. We should use our abilities well and strive for excellence. But ultimately, our work is not about recognition or achievement. It is an opportunity to serve Christ and the people He has placed in our lives.

Looking back, I think that is one of the greatest gifts of my Lutheran education. St. John's helped prepare me

academically for what I would do, but more importantly, it helped establish the foundation for *why* I would do it.

After graduating from St. John's, I attended Christ Our Savior Lutheran High School, where I was blessed with another group of teachers who had a tremendous influence on my life. Ironically, becoming a teacher was not part of *my* original plan. I intended to become a veterinarian, but several teachers from both St. John's and COSLHS encouraged me to consider teaching instead. Eventually, with the Spirit's leading, I recognized that perhaps following in my mom's footsteps and becoming a teacher and church musician wouldn't be so bad after all.

That decision led me to Concordia University, Nebraska, where I majored in Secondary Education with concentrations in vocal music and English. Music remained an important part of my college experience. I sang in both the A Cappella Choir and Chamber Choir and served as an accompanist for the music and theatre departments.

In December 2010, I married my husband, Matt, and life took us to his home state of Colorado. From 2011–2013, I served as music director at Mount Olive Lutheran Church in Aurora, CO. In 2013, I began teaching English and music at Lutheran High School in Parker, CO, where I eventually became the English department chair and remained until 2025.



Along the way, God blessed us with four boys: Luke (12), Noah (10), Benjamin (8), and Samuel (6). In 2025, after much prodding by the Holy Spirit, our family made a move to southeast Missouri. I currently teach Language Arts and dual-credit English courses at Saxony Lutheran High School in Jackson, MO. Life outside the classroom is rarely quiet with four growing boys, two dogs, two barn cats, nineteen chickens, and plenty of grass to mow, but we are grateful to call southeast Missouri home.

Of all the blessings that have come from teaching, some of the greatest have been the relationships with students, particularly those who may have felt overlooked or dismissed somewhere along the way. There is something incredibly meaningful about helping a student recognize that he or she is capable, valuable, and worth investing in. I have also come to appreciate the opportunity I have as a Lutheran educator to encourage young people to consider lives of service in the Church as teachers, pastors, directors of Christian education, and in the many other vocations through which God uses His people.



Looking back, I realize how many Lutheran educators God placed along my path. Some taught me in their classrooms. Others coached me, taught Confirmation, or simply interacted with me in the hallways and around school each day. At the time, I could not have known how much those ordinary encounters would influence the direction of my life.

Perhaps that is what I appreciate most when I think back on St. John's. The lessons taught there extend far beyond academics. Teachers may never know which lesson, conversation, practice, chapel message, correction, word of encouragement, or simple act of kindness a student will remember decades later.

And now, by God's grace, I get the opportunity to do the same for the students He places in front of me.

Thus, Lord Jesus, ev'ry task
Be to You commended;
May Thy will be done, I ask,
Until life is ended.
Jesus in Thy name begun
Be the day's endeavor.
Grant that it may well be done
To Thy praise forever.
LSB 869, verse 5



2002 Confirmation Class:
Left to Right :1st Row: Kelsey Seeger, Mark Langrehr, Karin Whelan, Jonathan Koen, Emily Buatte.
2nd Row: Rev. Rory Seeger, Erika Fehr, Chris Stenzel, Kyle Liefer, Rebecca Kaaz, Rev. Russell Koen.
3rd Row: Tiffany Schaefer, Bethany Deien, Kimberly Stellhorn, Sarah Wetzel, Alison Liefer.

The Pastor's Perspective: Rev. Mark Winkelman

13 Then children were brought to him that he might lay his hands on them and pray. The disciples rebuked the people, 14 but Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven." **Matthew 19:13-14 ESV**

My beloved family in Christ,

It has been a blessed and fruitful year here at St. John's Lutheran. I rejoice at all of our baptisms this year (16 thus far). The Spirit has been bringing people into church and it's a joy to see our attendance numbers also increasing. Thank you for your support and prayers as we continually seek to obey God's command to "Go, and make disciples."

An important part of making disciples continues after the children have been brought to Jesus in the waters of Holy Baptism. Just as Jesus said, "Let the little children



come to me," Jesus later commanded, "teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you." So, we not only baptize, but we continue to teach and train our children to observe His Word. I rejoice also in our 22 confirmations this year as we keep encouraging our parents to bring their children to worship weekly and teach them at home. Here at St. John's we also equip the children with God's Word so that the Spirit can continue to work, strengthening the faith given in their Baptism. As you see in the picture to the right, the kindergarten class recently received Bibles of their own, thanks to the Evening Guild. What a blessing to have members desiring to place God's Word into the hands of children and families, all who come to St. John's!



To the right, you can see this year's school cross picture (in watercolor form) as we remind our students again that it truly is all about the cross of Jesus Christ even as they learn about His creation in their other classes. As long as the Lord allows, we here at St. John's Red Bud will work to bring His children into God's Kingdom and teach them to observe all that He has commanded us. With your support and especially the work of the Spirit, we will continue to push back the gates of hell and increase the Kingdom of God. Finally, as our school children grow, we send them out equipped for every good work, to spread the Word out into the world. May our Lord bless our efforts as we raise up workers for the coming generation. God's blessings to you out in the world. Together, we rejoice in our Lord's work here and throughout the world as we look to His return and the resurrection of all flesh to life everlasting.



Save the Date

NEON NIGHTS

DINNER AUCTION

March 13

If you would like to receive your newsletter by email only, please send your email address to alumni.stjohn@gmail.com.

2026 DONOR TILE ORDER FORM
for
St. John's Lutheran School

Fill in the spaces exactly as you want it to appear.

- All printing will be centered on the 6" tile; you do not need to print it that way (printable area on tile is 5" which is indicated by the dotted line on example on reverse side).
- Remember to count punctuation marks and spaces between words when you are deciding how much will fit on each line (see reverse side for samples or stop into the New Gym Lobby to view the Donor Wall).
- Use your grade school class year only, not high school class if listing your year of graduation.
- Name: _____ Phone: _____
  Street Address: _____
  City, State, Zip: _____ E-mail address: _____
- Please make checks payable to: St. John's Lutheran School
- Please return all forms and payment to: St. John's Lutheran School, 808 S Main St., Red Bud, IL 62278
- If you have any questions regarding the tiles, please call the Office at (618) 282-3873 or email office@stjohnsredbud.org.
- A form may also be filled out online at https://forms.gle/6jDpHh2PktcAfLq28

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6" Tile for Gifts of $500 or more *
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18 spaces per line, 4 lines maximum. (Two lines of small font are available if only two large font lines are used – see below.)

Small Font (See reverse side.) (Optional)
32 spaces per line, 2 lines maximum. (Available if only two or less large font lines are used.)

*Your donation may qualify for more than one tile if exceeds $500 limit.

EXAMPLE

Andrew & Jane Smith

My help comes from the Lord.
Psalm 121:2

Jane Smith
Class of 1973

Thy word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path.

In Memory of our Christian Parents, John & Ann Smith

Andrew & Jane Smith

Andrew Smith
Class of 2021

Jane Smith
Class of 2023

Any special message can be used for the smaller font text (see examples above).