

Agriculture program at FLAHS gets nod

FOREST LAKE — The students of Forest Lake Area High School are discovering agriculture careers in a whole new way, thanks to a passionate faculty and innovative new facilities at the school. The high school's agriculture department was recently honored as the 2018 Outstanding Middle School/High School Program by the Minnesota Association of Agricultural Educators.

The honor recognizes the school's dynamic program, which goes well beyond the scope of traditional farming and introduces its students to newly evolving areas of agriculture, including aquaponics, alternative

energies and biotechnology.

"There is a growing demand for trained professionals to enter careers in this area," said Mike Miron, Forest Lake agriculture teacher and department chair. Miron, along with agriculture teachers Veronica Ward and Ann Tauzell, stay up to date on these career needs and other emerging trends through an active advisory board whose members work in a variety of diverse agricultural businesses.

"Students appreciate that our curriculum is relevant," Miron said. "They may not ultimately pursue a career within the agriculture, food or natural resources pathway, but they

will all be affected by these important areas in their everyday life."

Miron added that many of his students enjoy the active learning opportunities within the department, which include a variety of hands-on laboratory experiences. In 2017, the school opened a new Agriculture and Science Center with a modern greenhouse and lab space. Since then, the faculty has also expanded its lab programming to teach sophisticated techniques for things like soil and water analysis, electrophoresis, plant propagation and nutritional analysis.

The program also provides an opportunity for students to learn job

skills such as landscape design and construction, and greenhouse technology and floral design. Several of the department's classes can be taken for college credit.

"We try to meet the needs of students with diverse interests," Miron said. "Students can take the skills and information learned in class and apply it in a meaningful way."

As the Minnesota Outstanding Ag Program award winner, FLAHS will also be considered for the national award, which will be announced in November.

From press release

St. Croix Catholic introducing new principal at ice cream social

BY JACKIE BUSSJAEGER
EDITOR

STILLWATER — It is a joyous homecoming for St. Croix Catholic School's newest principal, Sister Mary Aquinas Halbmaier.

Although she was raised mostly in Idaho, Halbmaier was born in Little Falls, Minnesota, and is thrilled to have the chance to be near family and to continue her mission to educate the next generation at St. Croix Catholic School.

Before coming to St. Croix Catholic School, Halbmaier spent seven years as the principal of St. Gertrude School in Cincinnati, Ohio, and worked in many other schools around the nation prior to that.

Halbmaier was raised Catholic, and went to Thomas Aquinas College in Santa Paula, California, where she realized she was being called to follow the Lord. She joined the Dominican Sisters of St. Cecilia in Nashville.

"I didn't grow up with sisters; I thought it would be like the 'Sound

of Music,'" she said. "The first time I visited, I walked in and had this overwhelming sense I was at home. I've been a sister for 30 years."

She's worked in schools for almost as long, having spent 22 years in administration after teaching seventh- and eighth-grade English and language arts.

"I was made a principal young," she said. "I'm very present in the classroom and I always try to teach, because I think it's important for a principal to remember what it's like to be in a classroom so she can serve the teacher and the students. My goal as a principal is to support my teachers, do all I can to help them be the best teachers they can be. As we're doing that, the students are growing and happy and learning."

Halbmaier is excited to be coming to a school that is so well known for its innovative programs. St. Croix Catholic School was the first Catholic school in Minnesota to implement Project Lead the Way, a well-recognized STEM



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Sister Mary Aquinas

program. Halbmaier has been doing work along similar lines at St. Gertrude. She also expressed praise for the school's Northwest Association Standardized Testing (NWEA).

"The point of the NWEA is that you can really dig down deep into each individual student's strengths and weaknesses and really differentiate where they're strong, and what we can do to accentuate that," she said. "It gives you the information to help know each student, and then hopefully meet each student's needs and

build on their strengths ... It's a big plus in my book — every child is so different. They all have different strengths and weaknesses, and the better we know them, the better we can educate them."

She is also excited to continue work on the Institute for Excellence in Writing program that has been recently introduced to the school, as well as the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd. She admires the school's willingness to pilot new programs and methods of education.

"Junior high is my love. I love junior high students," Halbmaier said. "Not everybody can say that. I love them because there's so much potential there to help form them to be leaders in a school."

At St. Croix Catholic, the oldest students are encouraged to be leaders for the rest of the school, a model Halbmaier supports.

"It's really beautiful to see eighth-graders really leading the rest of the school, which is a beautiful bonus because it's pre-K through 8.

They really are leaders in a way they might not be able to be in middle school or high school. It helps them know how to lead, how to interact with younger students ... It's an age where if you let them go, they're not confident. To help them navigate being 12, 13, 14 years old in a positive way is just awesome. It's exciting to me; I want to take that and do even more with that."

One of her ideas is possibly instituting a household system, where students across different ages belong to a small-group "household." But first, she wants to get to know the school before adding anything new.

"(St. Croix Catholic is) already a great school, and there's a lot of competition in the area," Halbmaier said. "In my mind I have to take the great things that are already happening and

build on them so that we can become even better educators. I'm just excited to be coming to a place that already has so much good happening and building on that."

She also noted that she's excited to be back in a place where she can see snow. "Remind me that I said that in March," she added.

Students and families of St. Croix Catholic School will have the chance to meet Sister Mary Aquinas at the annual Meet the Teacher Day and Ice Cream Social from 3 to 5 p.m. Aug. 23. The Ice Cream Social takes place at St. Croix Catholic School, located at 621 Third St. S., Stillwater.

Jackie Bussjaeger is the editor of the Forest Lake and St. Croix Valley Lowdown, and can be reached at 651-407-1229 or lowdownnews@presspubs.com.



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