Creating a Better World, One Child at a Time:

Shorecrest Builds Character

'Educating the whole child' is not just a convenient catchphrase at Shorecrest.

Every day, in a hundred ways, teachers, staff and administrators place as much emphasis on character development as they do on intellectual growth.

By balancing the two, Shorecrest creates students who have the tools and the knowledge to effect positive change and the belief that they have a responsibility to do so.



Early Childhood children learn about caring for the environment.

By Mary Ellen Collins

"I am convinced that we are educating the leaders of the future," says Headmaster Mike Murphy, "and I would sure hope that Shorecrest graduates model integrity and moral values every bit as much as they model great academic, artistic, or athletic skills."

Creating moral awareness and an empathetic worldview starts with the youngest members of the Shorecrest family. Three to five-year-olds learn that hands are for helping and that positive communication involves using kind words. A Kindness Jar provides a visual measurement of their compassionate actions. If a teacher notices a child doing something nice for someone, that child gets to drop a pom pom in the jar.

"The people of Shorecrest make up a tight-knit community that strives for utmost success while building good morals and character."
—Ben Sabol, 11th grade





Lower Division students cut their hair for Locks of Love, an organization that donates the hair to children with cancer.

"They love to watch the jar getting full," says Early Childhood Director Betty Gootson. "We don't do a lot with rewards because we want to be intrinsic not extrinsic. We want them to do nice things because they're the right things to do, and it makes you feel good when you do nice things for other people."

Singing holiday songs to nearby condo residents teaches the concept of being neighborly; and combining the Junior Kindergarteners' annual pet show with a food drive for the SPCA or Friends of Strays demonstrates that human friends aren't the only ones who need our help. When the entire school raised money for hurricane relief, Early Childhood teachers devised a way for the children to take personal responsibility for their own generosity.

"It's easy for mom and dad to give the child money to bring in," Gootson explains. "We asked for the children to do chores to earn money to help the people who'd been affected. So, whether they set the table, fed the dog, or cleaned up the room – they were able to make a contribution they had earned."

In the Lower Division (Kindergarten – grade 4), students participate in the weekly gathering around the flagpole to learn the "life skill of the week." Discussions range from serious to light-hearted, like the week the teachers delivered a rousing rendition of Aretha Franklin's "R-E-S-P-E-C-T" as an introduction to that week's skill.

Every month, teachers in each grade nominate a "citizen of the month" and recognize those students' positive actions at a celebration attended by parents and family members.

Lower Division Head Penny Jennings emphasizes the importance of being a global citizen. The Internet is used to help expose students to people and activities outside their own community. Following a solo sailboat race around the world provided a valuable lesson in sportsmanship as sailors sacrificed an opportunity to win to help a sailor from another country.

Literature offers a range of opportunities for children to discuss the choices that characters make. Younger children can understand fables that have a moral. For older students, reading about explorer Ernest Shackleton could lead to a discussion about determination and resilience.

Jennings places a lot of emphasis on resilience and the importance of helping children learn to recognize the value of a setback.

"Teachers, themselves, model how making a mistake becomes a learning opportunity. When our students come to an obstacle, we want them to pick themselves up, persevere, and know how to make the right choices even when it's painful."

Middle Division teachers focus on helping the students acquire the tools they'll need to navigate the often-stressful waters of high school.

"In addition to being academically prepared with the skills and strategies to go into high school, we want them to develop the life skills, the ethical and moral behavior, and the strength to make sound decisions needed in order to keep themselves safe," says Middle Division Head Pat Craven.

All 5th - 8th graders now take a new Life Skills course, which covers Leadership, Guidance, and Study Skills. In the leadership component, students become the student council for their grade. The guidance component provides a supportive environment in which Guidance Counselor Ashley Lippincott facilitates discussions on issues including personal communication, friendship, and integrity.



Guidance Counselor Ashley Lippincott works with Middle Division students on a trust and team-building exercise.

Although the study skills component involves learning technical skills such as note taking and outlining, Craven has incorporated character education through her choice of source material. For example, students might learn to outline a story that deals with bullying; or take notes on articles about works of art that showcase cultural diversity.

Most middle schoolers don't have a well-honed sense of global awareness, so they do best with activities that have a more immediate connection. They demonstrate environmental awareness by "Sodding the Quad," planting gardens with butterfly-friendly flowers. And the 8th grade oceanography class gets sea grass from Bay Watch, plants it in the boggy area behind the football field, and eventually replants it along the coast.

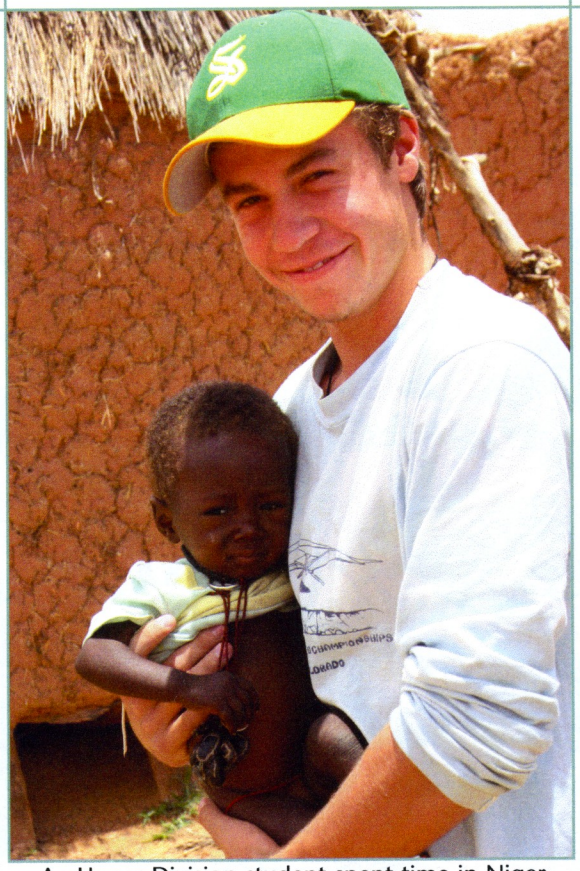
Craven cites the Harold Bruggeman Award as an example of how athletics and physical education provide many opportunities for character education. In memory of the much-loved physical education teacher, each year the physical education department recognizes a 6th grader who best exemplifies Mr. Bruggeman's sportsmanship and character.

Upper Division students have more advanced opportunities to hone their own value systems. For example, when Murphy arrived, he surveyed the students to learn their attitudes about honor, including issues like lying, cheating, stealing, and respect.

"They all knew that Shorecrest has an honor code, but there was no real clarity about what it was." Murphy asked the English classes to analyze, rewrite, and simplify the School's current statement on honor, creating an exercise in thinking and writing that also provided an opportunity to analyze and agree on the meaning of a moral value.

Upper Division Head Stephen Manella believes in bringing student voices forward, and instituted twice-weekly 15-minute assemblies as a forum for announcements, presentations, and a time to address issues of concern. This year, he gave the Student Council full responsibility for the Friday assembly.

"Shorecrest has forever changed me intellectually and spiritually. I simply love this school."—Petar Yanev, 8th grade



An Upper Division student spent time in Niger buying and delivering millet to locals who were in need of food.

"I said, 'This is your time. Do what you please.' It's one more way to gather as a community, and instill the fact that you are not alone in this environment, and your actions affect and influence those around you. Prior to Homecoming, the students used the time to address the student body about making good choices regarding alcohol. That's a message that's probably more powerful when it comes from peers."

Upper Division students have a chance to supplement their expanded worldview and sense of personal responsibility with extensive opportunities for community service. Eighty-two percent of students participate in one of four service clubs: Leo, Key Club, Junior Exchange, and Interact. Their activities range from running a toy and clothing drive for migrant workers' children to hosting meals for families at Ronald McDonald House to selling muffins and donating the money to an orphanage in China.

"Students do it because they have a genuine interest," says Manella. "We know how busy everyone's life is. These kids take a demanding curriculum; they're involved in extracurricular activities, and they still carve out time to help others. It speaks volumes about them."

It's precisely this giving spirit that forms the foundation of Murphy's dream of transforming the shotgun approach of serving many organizations into a more cohesive service learning program.

"Right now, we tackle any cause that comes up, rather than focusing on specific organizations. My hope is that one day we'll have lasting partnerships with organizations in the community, where the kids will become involved on a daily, weekly, or monthly basis."

Murphy is also working on a new slant to the annual Community Service Day by having each high school class focus on a specific area. Seniors will work with Academy Prep students, juniors will work on food and housing for the homeless, sophomores will concentrate on animals and young children, and freshmen will take environmental issues.

"As students move through high school, they will get exposure to all areas and find their passion. I don't want our kids to be fundraisers. I want them to be hands-on philanthropists."

From creating a Kindness Jar to facilitating lasting relationships in the community, Shorecrest's teachers, staff, and administrators share the belief that learning goes far, far beyond reading, writing, and arithmetic.

"Your education is incomplete if it's just academic," says Manella. "We can't fulfill the Jeffersonian goal of developing an educated citizenry if we don't value developing compassionate students who look beyond their own world to help solve problems."