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High Point Academy Imagines A Bright Future



– Courtesy photo

By May S. Ruiz

Carved into the foothills of Pasadena is a kindergarten to eighth grade independent school that has consistently provided an outstanding education for its students throughout the past 50 years. High Point Academy (HPA), located on five compact acres on Kinneloa Canyon Road, to this day remains competitive in a market which reputedly boasts some of the most high-achieving educational institutions in the state.

HPA was established in October 1965 when three women decided to open a small school for a few children. With Millicent Wilson serving as the first headmaster, it opened on Chester Avenue with 16 pupils; the following year enrollment grew to 50. In 1967 it had 75 students and eight teachers, and another space had to be leased to accommodate third to ninth graders.

By 1973 it became clear that their existing site wasn't big enough for all their students; construction on its present location began. In 1974 the 15 faculty members welcomed 230 students on their first day of school in this brand-new structure that featured a sports field. School uniforms were also introduced that year and a \$10 donation to the building fund was incorporated into the monthly statements (it continued until 1990).

The HPA library was opened and a junior high (seventh and eighth grades) science department was created in 1976. The decade between 1977 and 1987 saw more classroom and building additions, as well as the installation of computers.

When the school observed its 25th anniversary in 1990, it had 312 students, 29 teachers, and three administrators.

In 1993 John Higgins was appointed the sixth headmaster. He served in this office for 21 years and oversaw major expansions of the school's facilities. He also ushered in the age of technology with the installation of Smartboards in every classroom, the launch of a digital library, and the introduction of laptops in junior high.

Under Higgins' charge HPA's enrollment reached its capacity of 350 students. The staff and faculty grew to about 55 (31 teachers, one librarian, one school counselor, one learning specialist, seven aides and student supervisors; with the rest in administrative capacities). Sixteen teachers hold master's degrees and faculty boast an average length of service of 10 years.

High Point offers a vast array of subjects including: math; science; history/social studies; language arts (reading and writing); world languages (Spanish and French); writers' workshop; technology (coding, robotics, STEAM); visual arts and choral music; instrumental music; daily physical education; library program twice weekly; and a technology class (computer lab) several times a week.

After-school enrichment courses are offered every day during the school year with Kindercare for kindergartners and Eagle Club for grades one to eight. Some programs include: bricks 4 kids; chess club; dance; mad science; mathnasium; robotics; STEAM; cub scouts and girl scouts. An after-school musical theatre program is likewise available. Most seventh and eighth graders are in athletic teams and play a variety of sports in five different seasons in the California Interscholastic Federation (CIF).

The school holds small class sizes with an average student/teacher ratio of 11-to-1. In kindergarten to sixth grade, there are approximately 20 students in the classroom, with one teacher and an associate teacher who works with smaller groups.

Forty percent of HPA's student body is of diverse ethnic backgrounds (Asian Americans, Latinos, African Americans, and Middle Eastern) and 60 percent are Caucasians. Most of the students who arrive in kindergarten stay until they graduate in eighth grade.

HPA has a middle school placement program designed to help students and families find the perfect fit for them. Graduates matriculate to some of the most highly-selective schools in the Pasadena area including Polytechnic, Flintridge Prep, Mayfield Senior, Westridge School for Girls, La Salle, Flintridge Sacred Heart Academy, Loyola, Saint Francis, and Maranatha.

By the time Higgins retired in 2014, HPA had gained a reputation as one of the best elementary and junior high schools in the area. The sports field was renamed "Higgins Field" to commemorate his enviable legacy.

Dr. Timothy Burns was appointed interim headmaster for the 2014-2015 school year. He led HPA through the California Association of Independent School (CAIS) accreditation process where it was awarded the maximum certification of seven years.

Gary Stern, who in 2015 succeeded Dr. Burns as the eighth headmaster, is charged with ensuring the next half-century measures up to the success of the first five decades. Several events marked his first year, a milestone for HPA. On the first day of the school year, students and parents got to “Dive Into the 50th,” with a swim event at Gerrish.

Alumni students and parents came back on campus for the “Alumni Wine & Cheese” affair. On the 50th day of the school year, the entire student body, faculty, and staff gathered on Higgins Field to form an “HPA 50” and photographed by a sky lift and drone for posterity. A “Golden Gala” was held on April 30 to celebrate High Point’s anniversary in style.

The Earth Day and Green School Showcase in April was the capstone of HPA’s ongoing commitment to lead independent schools in the advancement of environment sustainability. The school was recognized as a flagship “green” school and local dignitaries were on hand to present an award.

During his first year, Stern hired a curriculum and innovations specialist who will work with teachers to incorporate and integrate technology in their classroom curriculum. This will pave the way for students to keep pace with technology and be able to access its power to prepare them for today’s global society.

This fall, Stern will unveil HPA’s strategic five-year plan, which outlines what’s ahead. Created in collaboration with the board of trustees, administrators, faculty, staff, parents, and students, he says it will provide a clear path forward to allow High Point to remain true to its mission and core values, and successfully grow and evolve.

Stern elaborates, “First and foremost, we focus on academic excellence through awakening the joy of learning in every student. We trust that when learning is a joyful experience, all students will rise to their full potential. We also believe in meeting the needs of the whole child, which means emphasizing not only the academic advancement but the social, emotional, and ethical development, as well.

“Through our strategic planning process we identified four pillars that support and sustain our mission: excellence, innovation, responsibility, and community,” Stern expounds. “These, in turn, are the cornerstones of our long-term objectives that focus on: a strong, challenging curriculum; a commitment to fiscal responsibility; fund-raising and friend-raising; campus facilities to optimize student learning; admissions, enrollment, and marketing; and recruiting, retaining, and supporting talented faculty and staff.”

“Next year, most probably, we will undergo a campus master planning process. An architect will be consulting with all our constituents to come up with a facilities design that will continue to support our academic program,” Stern reveals.

“Some of the upgrades we’re contemplating include: re-modeling the junior high classrooms; improving the sport court; expanding the snack shack; increasing technological enhancements; reconfiguring space to meet our curriculum needs; and adding more drought-tolerant landscaping,” Stern explains further.

HPA’s 50 years of establishment will be memorialized in posterity. Says Stern, “Sometime in the early part of the 2016-2017 school year, we will bury a time capsule to be opened in 2041. Students have gathered mementos from the five

decades that denoted a noteworthy event for the period. Each student included in this time capsule things that represent who we are today and their dreams and aspirations for the future. They also put in their predictions about how life will change over the next 25 years.”

Another 50th anniversary commemorative is a transportable mural hanging on an outdoor wall made up of tiles individually painted by a student. It is a tangible demonstration of the importance of each piece to compose one beautiful whole.

It was indeed quite an auspicious beginning for Stern. That he came on board during this landmark year for High Point must have been predetermined by fate as he himself celebrated his 50th birthday. And just as he is looking forward to the rest of his productive life, he is likewise eager to lead this singular school to achieve greater significance in the San Gabriel Valley.



August 4, 2016



ABOUT AUTHOR



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ONE COMMENT ON THIS POST TO “HIGH POINT ACADEMY IMAGINES A BRIGHT FUTURE”



Sandi Brune says:
August 4, 2016 at 2:38 pm

What a beautifully written article that creatively sums it all up! I have been on the faculty of HPA for 32 years, and May Ruiz did An outstanding job summarizing our school’s growth and blossoming.

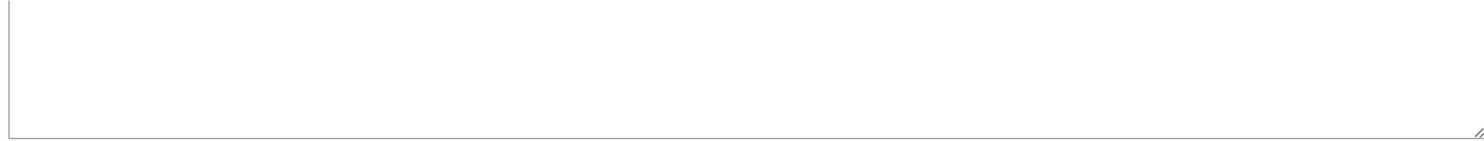
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