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Benedictine hospitality: “wanna race?”

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Quad 136

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Benedictine Hospitality: "Wanna race?"



As one of the public faces of Saint John's, I get the opportunity to meet many of the guests who come to our campus. Invariably, first time visitors make two observations about Saint John's. First, that we have a stunningly beautiful campus and second, that everyone is so friendly. One visitor even asked whether we taught our students to identify guests and then to hold doors open and say hi to them!

The first comment is not so surprising. The monks chose brilliantly when they decided that the woods and prairie around Lake Sagatagan would be home to the Abbey and University. The second compliment is perhaps a little more surprising since many of our campus visitors are from Minnesota, a state that has a well-deserved reputation for nice and polite people.

But after so many of these conversations, I have become convinced that our Benedictine hospitality and sense of community does set us apart, even for Minnesotans. What is particularly striking is that this behavior just becomes second nature for faculty, staff and students. The latter group pick up on the social ethos quickly and make it their own, as the encounter below suggests.

Sarah Gainey, the Environmental Education Coordinator at Saint John's Outdoor University, recently wrote the following to football Coach Gary Fasching, and I am using it here with her permission:

I work at Saint John's Outdoor University coordinating outdoor field trips for visiting preK-12th graders from the surrounding area. We normally hold our field trips outdoors in the Abbey Arboretum, but because a lack of snow this week, I was holding indoor field trips for 5th graders in the McNeely Spectrum. I would like to share with you an amazing interaction I witnessed last Thursday between members of your football team and a 5th grade class visiting Saint John's.

The class arrived early to eat lunch before our field trip. After they ate, they were allowed to run around the track, but were instructed to leave anyone alone who was in there working out, which included 3 members of the football team doing conditioning drills. As a few of the 5th graders crossed the track in front of the football players, one young man said to them, 'Hi there! Wanna race?' The wide-eyed look of excitement on the boys' face was priceless and they responded, 'We aren't allowed to.' I quickly intervened and said, 'Go ask your teacher if it is okay.'

A few moments later, the entire 5th grade class was lined up and ready to race the 3 football players. After a 'ready set go' everyone ran as hard as they could and the football players beat all the 5th graders. It wasn't how the race ended that was memorable, but instead the way the players treated the students that is going to be remembered by every student, teacher, and Outdoor U staff member that witnessed the interaction.

These were kids from a school in St Cloud with a high poverty rate and who have to deal with a whole host of issues no one that age should have to worry about. My main objective is to instill in these and all the kids who come to Saint John's for field trips a love of science and the natural world. But often times the field trip ends up being more about life, having a positive exposure to a college campus and college students, and about just being a good human being. Your football players helped me achieve that second objective probably without even thinking about it. They were just being kind and welcoming to a group of kids who will remember that day for a long time.

I didn't get the players' names but I did shake their hands and thanked them for

what they did. And I wanted to thank you for having those kind people on your team. Those kids might not remember what I tried to teach them about science that day, but they will remember how they were treated by people at Saint John's.



Photo: Richard Larkin McLay '17

As Sarah notes, this simple, and mostly likely, reflexive kindness on the part of these three Johnnies may well have an impact that reaches far beyond what the young men might ever imagine.

One of the biggest challenges our country faces in the years ahead is to address the achievement gap between students of color and majority students, a gap that is significantly larger for boys than girls. To take full advantage of the talents of this generation of young people, they will need post-secondary education, and the best way to make that happen is to instill in these children an assumption, at an early age, that college is not only a possible option but that it is an assumed option for most of them.

For relatively underprivileged elementary school children to come to a college campus and discover that people are nice to them, that college students are friendly and approachable, and that you have fun hanging out with them is a tremendous step in the right direction.

I am glad that Sarah did not get the name of the young men involved. Pick your favorite three Johnnies—it was them.

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Michael Hemesath is the 13th president of Saint John's University. A 1981 SJU graduate, Hemesath is the first layperson appointed to a full presidential term at SJU. You can find him on Twitter [at] [PrezHemesath](#).