

# Going global: inside and out



## Principal Dean Nicholas of Cincinnati Hills Christian Academy

Story by Doug Sandhage / Photo by Cathy Lyons

THIRTY MINUTES WITH DEAN NICHOLAS and there is no question that he could sell ice to an Eskimo, or convince the parents of students at the school he heads to let him take them to the North Pole for a field trip they will never forget.

It all began when Dean heard an intercom address while a high school student in Milwaukee in 1986. It said that applications were being taken to go to Israel as an exchange student. It changed his life, and paying it forward, it has changed the lives of many, many more.

Dean is principal of Cincinnati Hills Christian Academy (CHCA). He's been in the position for three years, but during the prior 11 years, he had headed the Christian Studies Department at the school. CHCA was founded in 1989 and today more than 1,400 students attend pre-K through 12.

I met Dean because he has two great stories to tell, and both involve the bigger world picture that Dean feels is so important

as CHCA students embrace the belief that “we are called as Christians to be citizens to the world.”

The first story involves CHCA's outreach to foreign students to enroll in the school. There are now 28 students representing 16 different countries at the school, including China, Korea, Vietnam, South Africa, Spain and Germany. Most are here, says Dean, because they were encouraged by educators to explore various options for high schools and universities, especially high schools that have a high success rate for college acceptance. CHCA has a 100 percent college acceptance rate so it is a perfect option, says Dean.

The students, adds Dean, live with a host family in Cincinnati during their years at CHCA. Just prior to our interview, Dean traveled to China and Korea to visit with the parents of some of his students. “I wanted them to get to know us, to feel connected to us,” he says.

Dean has an infectious grin, which would certainly capture the attention of any high schooler wanting something more than another day behind a desk. He and his wife, Julie, live in Finneytown and have three children: Jacobson, 8, Peter, 8, and Abe, 7. Jacobson came to them from Vietnam.

Foreign students, says Dean, add a “rich dynamic to the environment,” adding that if more host families can be found, more students can be accepted. The high school part of CHCA, now at 425 students, has a capacity for up to 500.

While incoming students are not required to be of the Christian faith, Dean says they are expected to participate in all activities in the school, which includes Christian studies and weekly chapels. “We do want them to know what a life of faith looks like.”

Dean says that the Cincinnati-based population at CHCA has no problem accepting the foreign students, which may be in part because students of Procter & Gamble families, many of whom have lived in other countries, populate the halls. Mandarin, Spanish and Latin are all taught at CHCA.

## WINTER TERM: TWO WEEK AWAY FROM A DESK

Since 2001, all high school students at CHCA complete what is known as Winter Term. In essence, it’s a chance for students to break away from the traditional classroom and enjoy in-depth, experiential learning in a particular area of interest.

The 38 faculty members of CHCA are expected to produce the two-week long courses – 28 are on the list for 2011 – for each term. Some of the courses take place on the CHCA campus such as health and physical education, or even studying the war in Iraq, while others involve trips, including an African adventure to Kenya; Greece and Italy; Europe by Eurorail; and mission trips to Nashville, Haiti, Costa Rica, New Orleans, and Jamaica. All courses have a reading and writing component. Winter Term is a graduation requirement that appears on a student’s transcript and is calculated in their GPA with a numerical grade. Nearly half of the courses cost \$500 or less; 25 percent are under \$100. The Kenya trip is \$2,900.

Dean has been a strong supporter of the program since its inception in 2001. Two years prior he escorted a group of 17 students for a month to Israel, and has since been back six times.

“Winter Terms allow you to grow in ways a classroom setting can’t,” says Dean. “The last thing I want them (students) to think is that education is limited to sitting in a desk. It’s (Winter Term) all a part of learning, engaging in God’s world. You get to live something different for two weeks.”

# School Done Differently

*The following is an edited blog post written in February by Dean Nicholas, High School Principal, Cincinnati Hills Christian Academy.*

When reflecting back on high school, what is remembered? Does one recall social events? Extracurricular activities? Moments and stories plucked out of time, floating about in one’s memory with no real mooring? Does one actually remember learning? Do any classes stick out? Or is it like trying to remember any specific meal from the past calendar year? Each one may have been important and nourishing but they all fade into an indistinguishable blur. Invariably when I speak with CHCA alumni about their greatest high school memories, they always come back to a Winter Term experience. For in Winter Term, students experience learning in non-traditional, experiential, authentic, and sometimes even exotic ways. If we possess a tool to inspire life-long learners, Winter Term is it.

Students choose from a menu of courses that range from classes in our building to excursions around the globe. Through this intensive two-week study, our students engage the world in new ways, carry out CHCA’s vision, mission, and core values, and have educational experiences that they will never forget.

If one considers Winter Term 2010 by the numbers, we provided a wide range of opportunities to meet the needs of our students. Twenty-nine percent of our students stayed in town, participating in Serve Cincinnati Hospitals, Serve Cincinnati Schools, Serve Cincinnati Headstart, Serve Cincinnati Elderly, Just Desserts, Career Internships, and Health which also met a graduation requirement. Thirty-three percent were out of country, traveling to Mexico, Jamaica, Costa Rica, Virgin Islands, South Africa, and Turkey. Thirty-eight percent spent part of their Winter Term across the U.S. with trips to Harlan, Kentucky; Chicago; Washington, DC; Charleston, South Carolina; Orlando; and Jackson Hole, Wyoming. Twenty-six percent participated in service while thirty-eight percent did missions trips.

But more significant than the numbers are the stories and words of our students and teachers. We have heard of lives changed through prayer and relationships in an orphanage in Monterrey, Mexico. One student recounted the power of reading the Book of Acts while following the footsteps of Paul’s journey through Turkey. Budding young scientists readily talked about how biology comes alive when feeding elk in the shadow of the Tetons or snorkeling in the waters of the Caribbean. Another student who built a house for a homeless man in Jamaica said, “This trip will forever alter my future behavior, attitude and decisions.” A young woman shared in chapel about how she learned to appreciate the wisdom of the elderly as she recounted her time in a nursing home.

The course Culinary Arts “went in search of the best way to travel from mindless eating to mindful eating, and found the answer in exciting cuisine.” Students on the Appalachia trip experienced an entirely different culture a few hours away from Cincinnati. A large group of our students recounted how they bonded with young people in schools around our city, with some even returning on their own during a day off of school in January.

As I reflect on the things I’ve heard and read since returning to our normal schedule, I was particularly moved by the stories of our students worshipping and fellowshiping with Christian brothers and sisters in churches around the country and the world. Despite culture and language, regional differences and dialects, politics and worldviews, the Spirit of Christ has the power to unite. Love was given and received. We are all different because of it. Students have followed our call to engage God’s world in all its beauty and complexity. They have returned to the classroom changed, seeing new relevance and possessing a new urgency to equip themselves to meet the challenges of the world.