MODUS VIVENDI

A WAY OF LIFE

COMMENCEMENT 2025

STAFF PROFILE:
NICKI KLIMISCH

A COMMITMENT TO SERVICE:
THE LAIRSON-GOMULKIEWICZ FAMILY

THE BEAR CREEK SCHOOL MAGAZINE

SUMMER 2025

THE BEAR CREEK SCHOOL

MODUS VIVENDI

Summer 2025

Modus Vivendi is translated as "a way of life" or "a manner of living." The Bear Creek School seeks to develop individuals for whom the classical ideals of excellence in all things, love of learning, spiritual commitment, and self-discipline have become a way of life.

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The mission of The Bear Creek School is to provide a high-quality, Christian liberal arts education in a nurturing environment that will enable each student to become the individual God intends.

Only online can you find the latest news, photos, and information about upcoming events. We're here, 24/7.

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LET US COME TO YOU

ALERTS

To get text or email reminders for upcoming events, athletics team events, and special programs, sign up for alerts at tbcs.org. Click on the "bell" icon next to any upcoming event on the school's website calendar to sign up for an alert for that event.

BLOG

For an in-depth view into the happenings at Bear Creek, read our blog at tbcs.org/blog. To receive alerts when new articles are posted, subscribe to the blog by clicking the "bell" icon at the top of the page.

THE BEAR FACTS

Each Friday during the school year, *The Bear Facts*, Bear Creek's weekly newsletter, is emailed to current parents, faculty, and staff. *The Bear Facts* contains news and announcements from each of the school's divisions and from the athletics department.

MyBC

Parents can find a complete list of role-specific resources, including the Family Handbook, on our website. See MyBC at the top of any page on tbcs.org and log in.

ON THE COVER

The grade 8 girls team won the Grades 7 and 8 Battle of the Books. Learn more about our Middle School library program on pages 34 – 39. Photo by Janeen Sorensen.

WHAT'S INSIDE

CLASS OF 2025
COMMENCEMENT

FEATURES

COMMUNITY AND ALUMNI

STAFF PROFILE

Learn more about Nicki Klimisch

Pages 24 – 29

GRATITUDE GALA

See photos from Bear Creek's Gratitude Gala

Pages 44 – 45

GRANDPARENTS DAY

See photos from Bear Creek's Middle School Grandparents Day

Pages 48 – 49

COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS FROM THE

HEADMASTER

By Patrick Carruth

JANEEN SORENSEN

I WASN'T GOING TO DO IT, BUT, IF MR. NORRIS CAN TALK TO YOU ABOUT COWS, THEN I WOULD LIKE TO INTRODUCE YOU TO THE SOUTHERN CICADA. [See pages 10 – 13.]

This 1.5-inch-long creature appears *en masse* from the ground every 17 years, emerging in such large numbers simultaneously that they overwhelm predators, land, and trees. Think locusts that can talk. As a child, I remember visiting my grandparents' home in the foothills of the Smoky Mountains, sitting together after dinner on the porch, hand churning peach ice cream to the cacophonous sound of hundreds of thousands of cicadas. The forest canopy would come alive with subtle movement and eerie melody. Once you hear this sound, you never forget it. In 2024 and 2025, the 17-year brood emerged, and besides being amazed yet again at the design of the Lord's creation, this got me thinking about today and the world you will be stepping into.

For reference, I thought it would be helpful to remind us of what was happening the last time the cicada brood emerged:

- You were all still little babies.


CINDY MCCAHILL

- On January 9, 2007, Apple Inc. CEO Steve Jobs unveiled the iPhone with the revolutionary touchscreen.
- On September 29, 2008, the Dow Jones Industrial Average fell 777.68 points—at the time, the largest single-day point loss in its history.
- On October 31, 2008, Satoshi Nakamoto, released the Bitcoin white paper, introducing cryptocurrency to the world.
- On November 4, 2008, Senator Barack Obama became the 44th U.S. President and the first African American elected to the White House.
- On June 23, 2008, Félix Hernández of the Seattle Mariners hit a grand slam home run against the New York Mets, signaling the high point of Mariners' success (just kidding, M's fans).
- In that same month, Intel introduced the Atom 230 processor.

And it's this last bullet point upon which I'd like to pause.

In 2008, the Intel Atom 230 chip was introduced with

a clock speed at 1.6 GHz. In 2025, NVIDIA introduced the Grace Hopper Superchip. In terms of percentage difference, the NVIDIA chip is exponentially faster. Considering the AI processing power alone, the difference is astronomical. The Atom 230's performance is in the range of billions of calculations per second, while the Grace Hopper operates in quintillions of calculations per second, meaning it is millions of times faster. That change in computing performance is likely to dramatically change how we will all live.

Here are some examples that already exist today:

- Real-time AI language translation adapts by learning from live spoken words, making translations more accurate which helps people communicate easily and breaks down language barriers.
- Adaptive learning platforms adjust content and lessons based on individual student feedback, personalizing learning and helping teachers analyze specific performance to identify areas where students need extra help.
- Self-driving vehicles are available in many cities today and are becoming more efficient and accessible for transportation and delivery.
- Healthcare diagnostic AI tools help doctors find and treat diseases more quickly, accurately, and individually by increasing the speed of diagnostics, thus improving patient outcomes.

I could go on and on, but the point is this: the world into which you graduate is a very different world than the one into which you were born. You will likely possess the ability to test and push beyond boundaries that existed for all human civilization. In some ways, this will be utopian, and, no doubt, dystopian as well. In a world where what you can do increases exponentially, how will you know what you should do?

Graduates, what will you then do? How will you then live?

The mission of The Bear Creek School begins with the words "high-quality Christian liberal arts." The liberal arts was a form of education first practiced by the ancient Greeks. The phrase translates to something like "the arts of liberation" or "the studies that free people." This practice of education was intended to reorient the minds of students away from the cave of ignorance and toward the light of virtue and good citizenship.

As Plato writes in *Republic:*

> *Educators should devise the simplest and most effective methods of turning souls around. It shouldn't be the art of implanting sight in the organ but should proceed on the understanding that the organ already has the capacity but is improperly aligned and isn't facing the right way.*

The Christian liberal arts are also about liberation but of a different kind. They are rooted in the gospel of Christ, which seeks to free your heart. This is the promise the Lord makes to Israel in Ezekiel 36, saying,

> *[26] I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. [27] And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. [28] Then you will live in the land I gave your ancestors; you will be my people, and I will be your God.*

And what Paul similarly conveys to the believers in Galatians 2,

NATION PHOTOGRAPHY

> [19] *For through the law I died to the law so that I might live for God.* [20] *I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.*

You see, this "Christian thing" changes things.

It is not about mere enlightenment. It is not just a code or set of principles to follow. It is not about **reorientation**. It is about **transformation**—a new creation. Becoming a little Christ, freed to live truth, beauty, and goodness in the world.

C.S. Lewis writes in the chapter "Let's Pretend" from *Mere Christianity*:

> *Put right out of your head the idea that these are only fancy ways of saying that Christians are to read what Christ said and try to carry it out—as a man may read what Plato or Marx said and try to carry it out. They mean something much more than that. They mean that a real Person, Christ, here and now, in that very room where you are saying your prayers, is doing things to you. It is not a question of a good man who died two thousand years ago. It is a living Man, still as much a man as you, and still as much God as He was when He created the world, really coming and interfering with your very self; killing the old natural self in you and replacing it with the kind of self He has. At first, only for moments. Then for longer periods. Finally, if all goes well, turning you permanently into a different sort of thing; into a new little Christ, a being which, in its own small way, has the same kind of life as God; which shares in His power, joy, knowledge and eternity.*

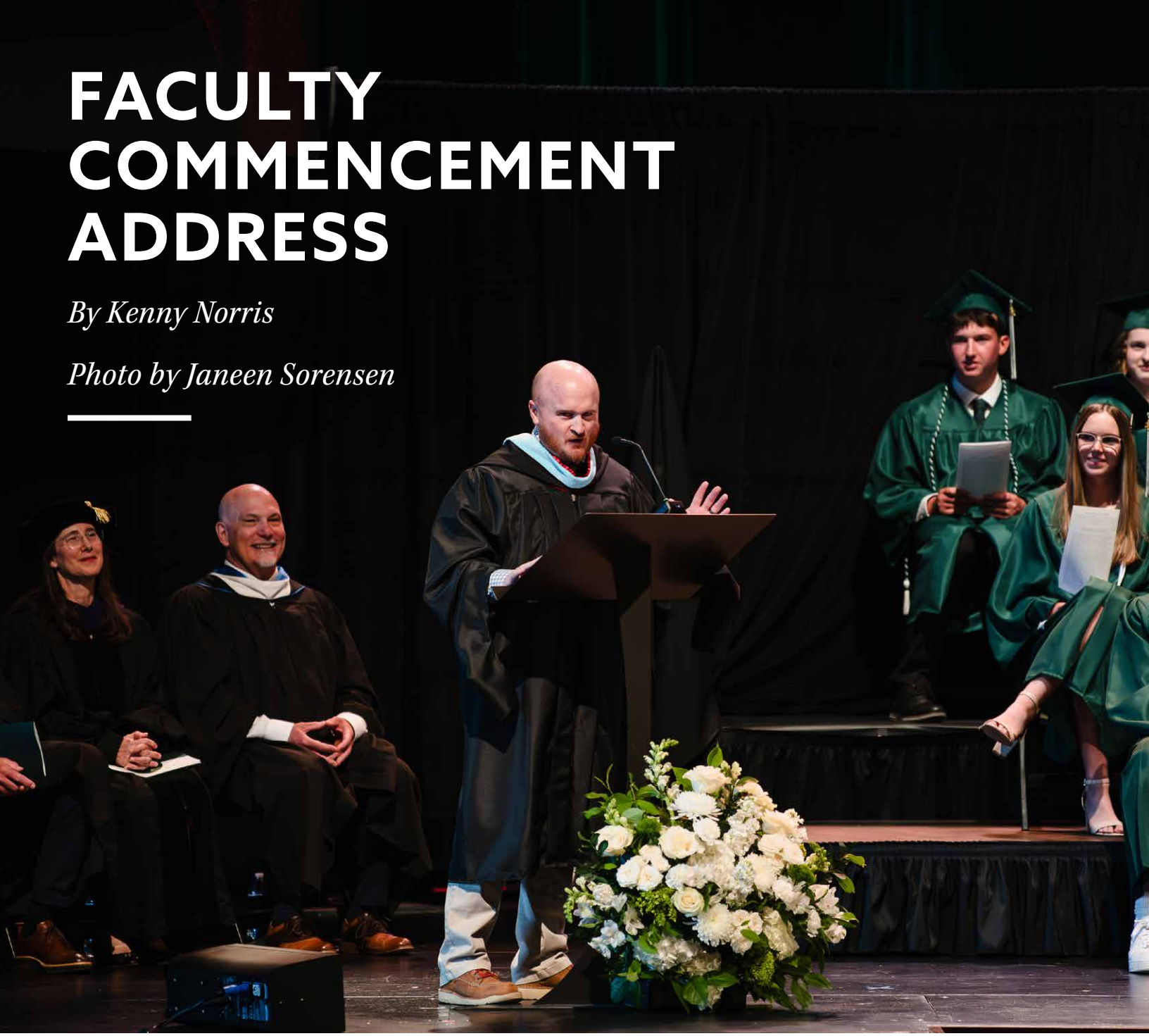
As you graduate today, like the cicada, you step into a world that looks very different from the last time you arrived. We hope this transformation is what you experienced in your time at The Bear Creek School and what we desire you will take with you as you leave us. This, we pray, is what you will do and how you will then live.

Congratulations, Class of 2025!

FACULTY COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS

By Kenny Norris

Photo by Janeen Sorensen



Congratulations to the Class of 2025 and thank you for asking me to speak to you. I assume this invitation acts as some sort of revenge for all of those in-class essays during your junior year. Why revenge? The chances of my making it through this speech tear-free, given that my daughter sits among you, are slim to none.

Knowing that I could break down crying at any moment, I opted not to regale you with stories I'll never forget from our time together—like our lunches together freshman year due to COVID restrictions (and a certain episode with projectile mayonnaise), or the sixth-grade trip to Mt. St. Helens (when I learned that two of you really like sugar), or a hike to Spider Gap that showed me I'm no longer a teenager in my hiking pace.

Instead, my subject today came with its own tears: showing a dairy cow competitively around the state of Washington as a tweenager. Her breed originated

in Holland, so I called her Holla.

Before I jump into some of the lessons I learned from Holla, allow me to provide some background information. I was the fifth generation to grow up on the family farm, and part of that heritage involved cows. So when my mom suggested that I join 4-H in order to learn more about cows and plug into the local farming community, it made logical sense. It did not, however, make emotional sense. Devoting my time to the mastery of *Super Mario Brothers*, *Legend of Zelda*, and *Metroid* seemed much more appealing. But moms hold a particular power to persuade us to venture forth when we would rather stay put. So I joined 4-H, more specifically a group of middle and high school students called the Carnation Clippers who showed dairy cows.

What does it mean to show dairy cows? Imagine the Westminster Dog Show, where trainers run their dogs around a circuit or have them strike particular poses—now replace the dogs with cows. That's one aspect of showing cows; we called it "fitting and showing." The other category centers on how well the cow meets an archetype, the archetype of the perfect cow. We call this round of competition "type."

With that background established, here are five of the many lessons I learned from Holla that will help you navigate the upcoming chapters of your lives.

Lesson 1: Remember That Calves Turn into Cows

From day one, I made mistakes in training Holla that would follow me for the next two years. More specifically, I thought it was a good idea to spar with her. In fact, she seemed to enjoy pushing me around with her head, so I would push back with my hands and shoulders. This sparring came to characterize most of our interactions, which was fine for a while. The problem? She would not long remain just a calf, but she would retain this desire to spar. The average calf weighs eighty pounds at birth, gaining almost two pounds per day during its first year. I soon had a sparring partner outside of my weight class. By the end of our first year together, Holla weighed over 1,200 pounds. I was daily reaping the consequences of those early poor decisions in the form of bruises and moments of terror.

This scenario highlights my first lesson: always consider the *telos*, the end goal, of your decisions. You've already started to realize this lesson yourself. Perhaps it took the form of less sleep than you needed in order to fit in all of the day's activities. Your *telos* was checking off the boxes of the day rather than prioritizing your health. One day of this? No big deal. A habit of it? Not even regular consumption of energy drinks can delay the inevitable consequences of a lack of sleep.

Lesson 2: Ask Before You Crash

In this instance, I was training Holla to follow me via a rope attached to a harness around her head. Her obstinance required some extra heft, so I wrapped the rope around my hand several times to ensure it would not fall from my grip. I do not know why she later decided to bolt, but bolt she did—up our gravel

CINDY MCCAHILL

road at full speed. So there I was, securely attached to the rope, being dragged horizontally up a cheese grater of a road as each wind of the rope slowly detangled from my hand.

This disaster begs the question: what are best practices? They are what experts do, born out of their shared experiences, to meet a goal. How do you learn best practices? By blending your curiosity with humility in a community. You have already shown us your curiosity and humility, but these are not qualities that you should ever think of as complete or full. What is scary about curiosity and humility is that they require a confession to weakness, that you are in some way lacking or incomplete. It is far better to realize this weakness, this deficiency in knowledge or skill, before you have to practice it. In my case, I should have asked someone how to hold the lead rope securely yet safely.

Lesson 3: Seek the Weak

In this episode, I was waiting to go into the competition arena. One "flex" required of all contestants was the use of a show halter, which barely secured the cow to the lead rope. It was supposed to be a way to show the judges mastery over the cow, a mastery that did not require a true harness, just the illusion of one. As you probably know by now, Holla was not ready for this requirement. She easily slipped out of her show harness and began to trot, gallop, and bound through the food vending section of the King County Fairgrounds. The situation instantaneously escalated beyond my skill set. Thankfully, there were plenty of able-bodied experts to help me calm and secure her.

It is tempting to look at moments of weakness like this as moments of failure. In fact, we tend to look only at some version of winning as success, which cripples us when we encounter areas of failure in others. Don't believe this lie. I have heard so many stories of Bear Creek students going off to college only to discover that a roommate or dorm floor does not really know how to write an essay or complete a particular math problem. You could, in that moment, rejoice in your triumph at knowing something that others do not. But don't stop there. Your strengths can help them in their weaknesses,

thereby building community. Help them rescue their errant cows.

Lesson 4: Fail Towards Your Future

Some of your weaknesses, however, will remain weaknesses, no matter how much you work on them. With Holla, the "fitting and showing" competitions remained an area of weakness, even after I changed up my methods and consulted with the experts for best practices. I encountered one of my first walls, a realization that I had come to the end of a skill set, a limit unique to who I am but not universal to others. Ironically, I would never have known this limit unless I had risked the journey. As you look ahead to your journey, take similar risks. Sign up for that class that you have zero experience in but always wondered about, like Meteorology or Cultural Anthropology or Jazz Music. Join the cooking class or frisbee golf team or boardgame club. If you run into an area of weakness, the end of your abilities or interests, rejoice. You now know yourself better than you did before. But be warned: you might also find an unexpected calling.

Lesson 5: Find Beauty in the Beasts

My last Holla story could be considered my greatest triumph, though Holla gets all of the credit, ironically. I qualified for the State competition in my final year with her. No, I had not finally figured out how to convince her to strike the right pose. Instead, she had won her way into the "type" category. To put it simply, she fit the cow archetype for beauty. If you asked me to explain what a beautiful cow looks like, you would encounter yet another weakness. I have no idea, but the farmer from whom I had borrowed Holla clearly did—he's the one who picked her out for me.

Nevertheless, I found myself competing with Holla against the best of the best that September on the basis of her merits. She earned a prize in the "type" competition, and I learned something about truth, beauty, and goodness: they exist independent of our efforts. Holla's fulfilling the archetype of the perfect cow could not be marred or elevated by my efforts (thankfully).

This transcendence, or value independent of our efforts, is the reason your teachers teach. There are moments when we helped you catch a glimpse of God in our subject matters. Perhaps it was an appreciation for number theory that made you feel small in the face of a Creator capable of such intricacy. Maybe you saw the *imago Dei* in a fallen character of an English text and realized the truth that God loves us despite our flaws. It could be that history has revealed to you the cycle of fall and redemption in such a way that you see your place in this tale where God forgives sins, heals weaknesses, and builds community.

So, should you rush out after graduation and acquire your own dairy cow to show? Let me recontextualize that question: should you enter college intent on difficulty, discipline, and reaching for excellence? Of course. Could you come up short? Perhaps. Our coming up short, however, simply means redirecting ourselves, not giving up. How do I know? After my failures with Holla, I turned to playing guitar, and I have not stopped playing in thirty-five years.

Speaking of potentially coming up short, I encouraged all of you to end your essays with a memorable chiasmus, so I will follow my own advice (I admit that it might not pass the test of cheesiness): don't let your calves become cows that crash your beautiful future; let your future bring beauty to those whose cows have crashed.

Kenny Norris joined the Upper School faculty at Bear Creek in 2005. Kenny grew up in Carnation, WA, the fifth generation raised on the original homestead. Outside of the classroom, Kenny enjoys spending time with his adult children, watching baseball with his wife, playing guitar, trail running, and mountain biking. Some of his favorite works include Tobias Wolff's *Old School*, C.S. Lewis' *Space Trilogy*, and Mark Twain's writings. Kenny holds a B.A. Secondary Education from Northwest University and an M.Ed. Curriculum and Instruction from Seattle Pacific University.

REFLECTIONS FROM

Excerpts from Commencement Speeches

Fifteen years. I've been around Bear Creek for a loooong time. I remember one day in preschool when I was so desperate to be like one of the "big kids" that my grandma let me wear a school uniform even though I didn't have to—a concept that is now slightly baffling. My 4-year-old self had picked up on something important: Bear Creek was a community that I wanted to be a part of in whatever way I could.

As a Bear Creek student and the daughter of an English teacher, it is in my blood to provide evidence for my claims, so I now present to you a warrant for my claim that Bear Creek is a community that has changed me for the better and will impact me for the rest of my life.

My first piece of evidence is from kindergarten, when I experienced the thrill of acting for the first time with my roles as Kitten #1 and Lamb in *The Dish Ran Away with the Spoon*. This first experience ignited within me a love of performing which continued throughout my time at Bear Creek.

CINDY MCCAHILL

Second: The Bear Creek community sparked in me a greater love and passion for Christ and learning about the things of God. I remember Mrs. Shimada reading us Bible stories from *The Jesus Storybook Bible*. I asked her if I could bring in my own personal copy; she said yes. While this event may seem inconsequential, this small act helped spark my love for Christ, a love that was fanned further and made deeper by my Middle School and Upper School Christian studies classes and led me to pursue ministry and theology as my future career.

One of the greatest examples of the Bear Creek community came when I was in sixth grade. I was hospitalized and diagnosed with type 1 diabetes. Soon after I returned home from the hospital, I received a bouquet of flowers from Bear Creek. While this was a small thing, it reminded me that I was not facing my diagnosis alone or even only with my family, there was a whole community of students, teachers, and staff who cared about me, were praying for me, and were ready to support me through the journey ahead.

One of my most treasured memories: travelling to France on the French language immersion trip over Spring Break my junior year. While this trip was exciting because it was the fulfillment of a lifelong dream, what made it truly special was the people I went with.

And with that I conclude my final evidence and warrant of my Bear Creek career. I hope I have made it clear that my claim is: without Bear Creek, I would have missed out on a community that has taught me so much about following God, growing in my talents, and embracing and facing every part of life. So, thank you to each and every person who is and has been part of the Bear Creek community for making it such a wonderful place to spend my childhood.

Rory Norris

THE CLASS OF 2025

"It's a small Christian school in Redmond." That was my go-to response every time someone asked me where I went to school. For the past 14 years, I have been saying the same sentence. That "small Christian school in Redmond" became something I am proud to be a part of. It became home.

This place did not just shape my education. It shaped my identity—through sports, through friendships, through shared wins and rough losses. This place has molded us—not just into students, but into people who care, who show up, and who keep going.

The things I will take with me are the relationships I built, especially with the teachers and staff who went above and beyond to pour into our lives. Mr. Higley, who casually described how he made a black belt tap in his jiu-jitsu class at lunch. Mrs. Dunn, handing me back a test I completely flunked with the biggest, most genuine smile on her face. Coach Mendo, giving us a motivational quote before practice every day. Mr. Norris, politely denying an extension on an essay. Mr. Summers, happily accepting an essay that was three weeks late. Profe Gardiner and Profe Páramo, trying their best to help me understand the subjunctive, past, present, and imperfect tenses—even though we all knew that was not going to happen.

High school has also taught me how to handle failure, and maybe more importantly, how to grow from it. Part of growing from failure is learning to take responsibility, stand up, solve problems, and move forward. And no one instilled that mindset in me more than my mom. When I needed money for the summer, my mom told me, "Figure it out." When I asked how to book an appointment for a haircut, she said, "Well, Max, just figure it out." She knew I could figure it out if I tried, but she wanted me to learn, to be independent, because she knew I would be faced with many tougher tasks down the road.

Now we step into the next chapter. The unknown. Now it is our turn to "figure it out." And as we do, I want to leave you with this verse, Philippians 1:6: "Being confident of this, that He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus."

It is easy to treat graduation like the finish line. But it is more like a checkpoint. God is not finished with us. The friendships we made, the losses we endured, the things we got wrong—and the things we got right—are all a part of the good work He started. And He is going to keep growing us in ways we cannot even see.

So, here is my advice as we head off into the unknown: Be the person who shows up. Be the one who tries again even after failing. Be the friend who listens. Be the classmate who encourages. And remember—none of us got here alone. We have had parents praying, teachers pouring in, coaches believing in us, and friends walking beside us. So, hold onto those relationships. Keep showing up. Keep growing. Keep trusting that God is not done with your story yet.

JANEEN SORENSEN

Max Bieber

Judy Shi

JANEEN SORENSEN

Four years ago, I stepped onto The Bear Creek School campus carrying more than just a backpack—I carried the weight of uncertainty. As an immigrant from China, I wondered if I would ever belong. Did I act American enough? Was my English good enough? And as for this school: Was I … Christian enough? Yes, I know how absurd that sounds now, but back then, the questions felt deadly serious. But hey, looking on the bright side, I loved those "identity" essay prompts we would get in English classes. I always had plenty to share!

Corny as it might sound to call Bear Creek my second home, it did indeed become more than just a school to me. As much as I groaned about being sick and tired of assignments, as often as I dramatically "broke down" over tests, and as many times as I secretly threatened that, "I'm dropping out tomorrow" (thank goodness, I didn't), I shared countless unforgettable moments here with some of my favorite people. Turns out, God cares more about honest questions than polished perfections. And fitting in? That happened when I finally realized that nobody else had it all together either.

Of course, that doesn't mean I didn't fight myself along the way. There were so many moments I wish I could redo: tests I should have studied harder for, speeches where my voice trembled, and times I let fear take control instead of faith. There were times when I was convinced that I was not smart enough or hardworking enough, and every B felt like an F, and I thought, maybe, just maybe, I have failed to be the individual God intended.

Because through those struggles, I realized that every obstacle I stumbled across was a part of the path. We are all so busy chasing what's "next," that we forget to discover the "now." But the truth is that God's plan is not some linear highlight reel. It is in the plot twists and the unscripted moments, the ones that feel like glitches until you realize they are clues towards success. Like when you rewatch a movie and catch details you missed the first time. Those "aha" moments when the struggle finally makes sense and you see how it was preparing you for what could come next.

And what a journey it has been. To sit in classrooms where teachers saw the potential I did not see in myself. To laugh with friends who became family. To stand on stage, my voice shook but grew stronger each time. Bear Creek did not just educate me—it revealed to me that the person I am today is who I was always meant to become, with flaws and all.

So, I carry this truth with me when I say my farewell: Life will always have regrets that linger, but they do not define us. What matters is that we were here, that we loved fiercely, struggled honestly, and rose with resilience. Wherever God's path leads me, I will walk forward as Bear Creek has taught me to walk—not perfectly, but authentically, with all my flaws, my faith, and everything in between.

Life, in many ways, is the art of turning the pages. We are at the end of this chapter and are about to part ways to pursue separate paths. May we shine brightly in the years when we can no longer see each other often. May we uncover every hidden treasure in our lives, no matter where our journey takes us.

Mike Mao


JANEEN SORENSEN

Reflecting on our journey as the Class of 2025, the culmination of these past few years is much like a chapter in a good book. For all of the Gen Alpha out there: a book is a collection of pages containing life-changing text, best enjoyed with a cup of tea. Bittersweetly, one story concludes today and another begins, one just as beautiful, in which "every chapter is better than the one before."[1] Like any narrative arc, the past four years have a beginning, middle, and end. Or, as Mr. Norris tirelessly drilled into us last year in AP Lang: an exposition, climax, and denouement. And like any literary masterpiece, our story starts at the beginning: with ninth grade.

Freshman year was the exposition when I somehow learned more about ancient Greek male hospitality than history, and more about John's remarkable acting skills than Shakespearean literature. Just like any typical novel, there are the chapters upon chapters of text, which seem monotonous but are nonetheless impactful. Similarly, sophomore year was much like ninth grade, except I learned more about fine calves and the proper way of microwaving tea in AP European History with Dr. Sorensen. Latin IV with Dr. Mills might have turned into a year-long class on philosophy. After two years of rising action, we have reached the climax of our narrative.

Eleventh grade felt like a roller coaster. Two years of chemistry with Ms. Bell might have played a part in my newfound fear of half-sheets of paper and writing utensils. Mr. Norris' dreaded 40-minute handwritten essays gave me one too many bouts of writer's cramp. Honors U.S. History did little to quench my innate hatred of Andrew Jackson. After facing moments of tension, when the protagonist seems to have been defeated and the enemy victorious, we have finally reached the denouement! After slaying the dragon and persevering through college applications, senior year brought us the joy experienced during our junior year but without the stress. In AP Biology, we learned that the mitochondria are in fact not the powerhouse of the cell. Multivariable Calculus taught us that double and triple integrals, in fact, exist. After the past four years, we have reached the end of our narrative! We've done it!

Like any novel, there are pages of dedication and thanks. Mrs. Shipley for dealing with our calculus class three years in a row. Mrs. Scrivner for putting up with our six-person Latin class' inability to translate, or as we call it, "cook." Dr. Sorensen for somehow remaining collected while our speech and debate team goes wild past nine o'clock on a Saturday. Last, but not the least, Mr. Norris and Mr. Summers, for patiently guiding me as I tried to relearn how to write an essay and construct a how, what, and why thesis statement. Obviously, our graduating Class of 2025 could not be complete without my fellow seniors. Thank you to each of my fellow classmates for such a joyful and memorable high school experience. And the greatest appreciation to the faculty and our parents for making our high school journey one of the most spiritually and academically growing, strengthening, and fulfilling experiences ever. Thank you for the opportunities presented to us and the encouragement to take advantage of them. And thank you for allowing us to better know God, our creator from whom we were modeled from the beginning.

[1] C. S. Lewis, *The Last Battle* (1956)

As an only child, I have always lived between two worlds. The first was the real world, one of boring schoolwork, long days, science labs, and math problems. The second was the world of my imagination. A world where no matter what book I was reading or story I was hearing, I could escape into something bigger, and I could be the hero. For a long time, those two worlds were separate. Reality was routine, and imagination was refuge. It was not until I came to Bear Creek, though, that I learned that those two worlds were not separate at all. They could overlap; in fact, they complemented each other beautifully in ways I never expected.

At Bear Creek, I have explored the circles of hell with Dante, sailed aboard a raft with Huck and Jim, lived in the tyrannical world of Oceania, and sung songs on the bayou of the Florida Everglades. Even in science class, I was not confined to worksheets or textbooks. I snorkeled through coral reefs in Hawaii with Mrs. Dunn and journeyed from the rough ER to the Golgi apparatus with Dr. Blakeley. In every class, whether it was STEM or humanities, I did not just learn content. I learned about myself. I learned how I think, how I feel, what I am passionate about, and how those parts of me can ripple into the world around me.

JANEEN SORENSEN

Seniors, we are the heroes in the books we have studied. Like Odysseus, we have encountered the Sirens of AP exams, calling us into the inevitable doom of stress and late nights studying. And we have faced the temptations of Circe's island, also known as TikTok doomscrolling. Like Dante, we took risks and ventured into dark forests, uncertain of where we were going or how we would get out. But no matter how lost we felt, we always had the guidance of our own Virgils, our teachers, who dedicated their time to nurturing us in wisdom, knowledge, and grace. Like Holden Caufield, I am sure many of us have felt stuck in time, wondering: why am I here? What is the point of all this? And where do the ducks go in the winter? And finally, like Janie Crawford, we have lost parts of ourselves to gain new ones. We have ridden ourselves of harmful habits; we have loved, lost, and grown from the pain of our hurt.

We have each taken different paths: some of us, like Antigone, stand up for what is right even when it is hard; some like Victor Frankenstein, learned hard lessons from our pride but continue to grow from it; and some of us are like Holden, still walking through New York trying to find ourselves in a world that doesn't always make sense. But all of us, every single one of us, have been on a journey.

And now seniors, as we close this chapter and turn the page, we carry with us more than just diplomas, report cards, and memorized information. We carry stories. We carry lessons. And most importantly, we carry with us the friends, classmates, and mentors who have walked beside us for these past four years. This community has shaped us, challenged us, and held us up in many ways that will result in our greatest successes and greatest defeats; no matter how badly the road twists and turns, we will each find our way. I know it. After all, we have already been heroes once.

Tvesha Reddy

CONGRATULATIONS TO THE CLASS OF 2025

Dhilan Charles Abraham
Baylor University

Anhui Mei Ang‡***
University of Washington

Caylin Reese Bennetsen***
Southern Methodist University

Maxwell William Bieber‡
Texas Christian University

Jonathan Douglas Britney‡
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Hannah Elizabeth Zuckett***
University of Arizona

‡LEGACY HONORS (BEAR CREEK STUDENT FROM KINDERGARTEN THROUGH GRADE 12)

***SUMMA CUM LAUDE (3.9 – 4.0 GPA)

** MAGNA CUM LAUDE (3.75 – 3.89 GPA)

*CUM LAUDE (3.5 – 3.749 GPA)

A COMMITMENT TO SERVICE:
THE LAIRSON-GOMULKIEWICZ FAMILY

BY EMMA FIRMINGER '21

PHOTO BY JANEEN SORENSEN

IN APRIL 2013, IN THE MAIN BUILDING'S CORNERSTONE THEATER, Bear Creek students performed *Fiddler on the Roof.* Sitting in the audience were Andrea Lairson and Bob Gomulkiewicz. Bob can still picture one particular cast member dancing on stage, living and breathing and then becoming a persecuted Russian peasant. What was remarkable was that this student is also an internationally recognized genius in mathematics. The image of that brilliant, analytical student learning to empathize with the humanity of his character illustrates exactly what Andrea and Bob love about a Bear Creek education.

Andrea Lairson and Bob Gomulkiewicz have been part of the Bear Creek community for over twenty-five years. Before either the Upper School or Main buildings existed, Andrea and Bob sent their daughter Abigail Gomulkiewicz '11 to kindergarten at The Bear Creek School's early location in a church basement in Woodinville. Not long after, Andrea joined the Board of Trustees, Bob began volunteering at math stations in Mrs. Erickson's classroom, and their daughter Katherine (Katie) Gomulkiewicz '13 also started elementary school. Their family became members of a community that would not be the same without them.

Andrea and Bob were not expecting to send their daughters to an independent school, but after hearing founder Nancy Price and teacher Lena Whitlock discuss Bear Creek's mission to provide a Christian liberal arts education with excellent academics, their priorities changed. At what they thought was an open house, but was in fact a State of the School presentation, they then witnessed the dedication of Bear Creek parents and faculty to this vision and to the construction of the Main building (at the time it was the only building) on Redmond Campus. In that moment of inspiration, Andrea and Bob recognized Bear Creek as a place of purpose, honesty, flexibility, and key parental support. Those principles are defining features of Andrea and Bob's investment in our community.

THOUGH THEIR OWN CHILDREN HAVE GRADUATED, IT IS STILL JUST AS IMPORTANT TO ANDREA AND BOB THAT THEY CARRY FORWARD THE BLESSING THAT THIS SCHOOL HAS BEEN TO THEIR FAMILY.

Andrea joined the Board of Trustees in 1999 and soon was elected as its Chair, a leadership role she has served in for over twenty years. Andrea is an attorney who specializes in non-profit organizations, which has made her an essential influence in the health and sustainability of our school. She recognizes the correlation between the classroom and the boardroom, understanding that a collaborative spirit among leaders impacts all other areas, too. In this ministry, she continues to foster the future of Bear Creek.

While serving as Chair, Andrea has also led committees such as the No Ordinary People committee, and it was she who led the search for Patrick Carruth, our President and Headmaster. Beyond the board, Andrea volunteers as a coach for our Upper School forensics (speech and debate) team, successfully leading students to State and National tournaments. I recall the gift of

Bob and Andrea with Paige and Patrick Carruth at the 2025 Glitz & Glam Gratitude Gala

Andrea's time and editorial guidance on my own speeches, as a former member of the forensics team, and I think about that every time I gaze up at the State Championship banners of the many students she coached. In guiding students through these competitive events, Andrea has seen how Bear Creek students stand out in the world. Thanks to the excellence of our Christian liberal arts commitment, the application of knowledge is intuitive and, most importantly, the virtue of kindness is top of mind.

Bob is also an attorney and a law professor at the University of Washington. He has also coached the forensics team, beginning in its inaugural season alongside head coach Kevin Davison, and later grew the program with Andrea and head coach Rob Sorensen. Bob and Andrea's oldest daughter Abigail was one of the team's inaugural members and won the team's first District Championship in debate (with Cameron Kessinger '11), and younger sister Katie was the team's first State Champion. But before speech and debate, Bob served the Bear Creek community coaching Middle School basketball and soccer and helped lead the worship team for Lower School Chapel with Susan Diamond, another member of the Board of Trustees.

Over his years as a volunteer, one of Bob's favorite moments was when then-freshman Adesuwa Agbonile '17 won her first of four speech State Championships. Amid celebrations and congratulations, Adesuwa ran back to "Coach G" to say, "Thank you for believing in me." That memory has stuck with Bob and for good reason. Not only does it demonstrate the gratitude and character of a Bear Creek student, but it also hints at what makes our community successful: the belief, support, and dedication of those guiding it, whether from parents, volunteers, or trustees—or all three.

Bear Creek empowered and educated their daughters, and even though their own children have graduated, it is still just as important to Andrea and Bob that they carry forward the blessing that this school has

COURTESY PHOTO

Bear Creek's speech and debate team at our 2016 Grizzlies Forensics Invitational

been to their family. They have been responsive to the Lord's work in this community and still prioritize the mission of forming compassionate and critically minded Christian leaders who can go out and influence the world for good. Katie serves as Bear Creek's Dean of College and Academic Advising, helping more graduates take their next steps forward. As the forensics team's head coach (with Jesse Domingo '15), she will continue to help students grow and compete.

Andrea and Bob know how important a Christian liberal arts education is even more now than they did in 1998. High-quality academics in a faith-based setting is a recognized virtue of Bear Creek. Intentionally encouraging every student to become the individual God intends while equipping each one to change the world was—and remains—a rare combination, and one that owes so much of its strength to the dedication of the Lairson-Gomulkiewicz family.


COURTESY PHOTO

At the 2019 WIAA 3A State Speech Tournament where the team placed second overall

STAFF PROFILE:
NICKI KLIMISCH

BY MORGAN JAMIESON

PHOTO BY SINI FERNANDEZ

JANEEN SORENSEN

GUITARS STRUM, TAMBOURINES SHAKE, AND THE CORNERSTONE THEATER FILLS WITH THE SOUND OF YOUNG VOICES SINGING, "Trust in the Lord with all your heart..." It is a sea of motions as students in kindergarten through grade 4 each point upward, put their hands over their hearts, stomp, and clap along with the music. This is Lower School Chapel on a typical Tuesday morning—joyful, full of energy, and centered on God's Word. For the last five years, Classroom Assistant Nicki Klimisch has been a steady musical presence at our weekly Lower School Chapel. Nicki has helped lead Chapel songs with energy and warmth alongside worship leader Claire Mars. However, not many know that she wrote our full collection of Bible memory verse music, 42 songs in all, each memorized by hundreds of Lower School students, past and present.

Nicki first connected with The Bear Creek School in 1995, before her eldest child, Kristen, became a student. She recalls attending open house events for prospective parents. "I went every year, starting when Kristen was three, hoping my persistence would help get her in!" She laughs. "Not sure it helped, but we were thrilled when she was admitted."

But before motherhood, Bear Creek, and memory verse songs, Nicki's path looked very different. Nicki was born in Grand Rapids, Michigan, and grew up outside of Detroit. As a child, she filled her free time singing and creating stories. She remembers how during her sister's horse shows, "I headed off to the fields, telling stories and singing songs to the trees. I'm sure any onlookers questioned my sanity, but I was in my happy place," she describes. "I had a very active imagination." Nicki loved working with children, and at 14, she even had her own Sunday school class of fourth-grade students. She also had a great love for music and drama, acting in school plays and singing in choirs and at church. "I

COURTESY PHOTO

considered pursuing careers in those fields, but I'm a realist," she explains. "I lacked the pipes to make it as a professional vocalist or the talent to make it as a pianist." She tells how, although she took piano lessons for six years, "My rhythm was all over the place; I just couldn't seem to play and count at the same time!" she admits. "But I'm so grateful that I learned to read music."

Confused about what to do, yet determined that as a high school freshman it was time to seal her future, she asked her parents for their advice as to what she should do with her life. Their answer was swift and practical: "You love to write, and you love to argue, so be a lawyer." From that point on, she set her sights on a career in law.

For Nicki, it made sense. It checked the right boxes. "I did have a strong sense of justice and loved to debate," she explains, "and I was part of that generation of women who only recently had been given the opportunity to go through the same career doors as men, so piercing the glass ceiling appealed to me." It wasn't until junior year at the University of Michigan that it dawned on her that she should "probably find out what lawyers actually do before continuing to law school."

An internship at the public defender's office quickly revealed it might not be a good fit. "What could I do? I was a senior in college, majoring in political science, with zero interest in politics. I found myself thinking about teaching and wondering why I hadn't considered that path more seriously," Nicki describes. "It felt too late to change, so I plowed ahead on the course I set for my life when I was fourteen and headed off to Northwestern University Law School." It was there that Nicki's faith deepened through her involvement with the Christian Legal Society and the Moody Church in Chicago. She married her college sweetheart Kurt after her second year.

Opposite page: Nicki surrounded by her family

Right: Nicki and other Vacation Bible School volunteers during the Kingdom Roundup program

COURTESY PHOTO

Following graduation, Nicki joined Kirkland & Ellis in intellectual property (IP) litigation in Chicago, intending to focus on trademark and music copyright law. For Nicki, the cases were interesting to work on, but as for the technical side of patent infringement litigation? Not so much. "Let's just say I did not have a fun time with that," she laughs. A visit to the Seattle area during a sunny, dry spring sealed Nicki and Kurt's decision to make a big move to the Pacific Northwest. "It was hard to leave our families in the Detroit area. Neither of us had lived outside the Midwest, but we decided to go for it," she said. A year later, Kristen was born, followed by Noah, Ian '16, and Daniel '19.

As her faith deepened, so did her indecision about her career. "I started to feel tension with my role as a litigator," she said. "I loved being home with my kids, but I still had this desire for a career, though I felt law was not where I wanted to be." She remembers, "I felt like a freshman in high school all over again—except now I was an adult, married with four children, and still unsure of my direction. What I didn't realize was that I was exactly where God wanted me to be."

In the early 1990s, Nicki and her family attended Overlake Christian Church. At the time, Overlake created its own Vacation Bible School (VBS) curriculum, and a good friend from their home fellowship group, Sue Montgomery, had been asked to lead the music and drama for it. Nicki remembers, "Sue told me, 'If you'll do this with me, I'll do it.' And I said yes!" The first year, 1995, the VBS production was very small. As time went on, Sue and Nicki realized they wanted songs that were unique to their characters, scripts, and themes. "Why don't we try writing our own music?" Nicki said. And they did. Someone played guitar, another person played piano, and they had a small vocal team that recorded their first music on a cassette tape.

Each year, the VBS production grew. Cassettes became CDs, and every child who registered for VBS took one home. They created five different Vacation Bible School themes over ten years. Nicki would write songs whenever inspiration struck, often late at night. She had little kids at the time, so she would wait until they were asleep. "Around midnight or 1:00 a.m., I would go into the closet in my master bedroom with a cassette player, and I'd sing as God would give me melodies," she laughed.

"At its height, we had 1,200 students attending Vacation Bible School each year," Nicki remembers. "Our CDs got fancier and fancier. We had outside instrumentalists and producers, and our vocal team got bigger and stronger." Then, Overlake made its own in-house recording studio, and the church took up the instrumentation and the production process. Nicki describes how she and Sue "marveled at everything the Lord was doing because neither of us had any songwriting training, yet God just kept giving us ideas." Like Proverbs 16:3, *Commit to the Lord whatever you do, and he will establish your plans.* Nicki states, "That's exactly what we experienced. We gave our work to Him, and He used it for His Kingdom."


COURTESY PHOTO

Fun at recess with students from the Class of 2030

Nicki recalls a special moment as a newer Bear Creek parent, walking back to Owens Field during the Walk-a-thon (now Grizzly Run). "I heard music playing on a boombox. It sounded familiar but I couldn't place it. Suddenly it hit me—it was *my* song playing! It was a VBS song I wrote and sang called 'Good Kid,'" she smiles. "I couldn't believe it. I can't even describe the impact that moment had—an emotional rush of disbelief, joy, and thankfulness. I'm pretty sure I cried."

Eventually, that season of doing VBS together came to an end, but Nicki and Sue kept collaborating. A former VBS teammate asked them to write a children's ministry song for her church's annual "princess party" where little girls experience, learn, and celebrate their worth as daughters of the King. Now available on Spotify, the song "Every Song That You Sing" serves as a musical companion for Sue's new book, *And the King Smiled*, coming out January 2026. Nicki reflects, "The fruits of this collaboration were totally from God. He gave us the melody, the lyrics, and the people to make it all come together."

In 2013, Nicki applied to work at The Bear Creek School, and as an employee, she gained new insight into how deeply the faculty and staff love the students. Nicki was placed in Room 128 as a classroom assistant (CA) in Pam Erickson's kindergarten class. "What a godsend," she remembers. "Pam is such a beautiful soul, and it was such a blessing to work with her." As a CA, Nicki noticed how it could be difficult for their kindergarteners to memorize the weekly Bible verses, and she had an idea she thought could help.

"Turning the collection of Bible memory verses into songs became my goal—my dream." Nicki asked a friend from her church, Chandler Faraone, who played banjo, bass, and guitar, if he would be willing to provide instrumentation and help produce them, and, "By God's grace, he said yes!" What started as a few songs grew into a beloved three-year collection of 42 Bible verse songs that every student attending Bear Creek's Lower School comes to learn by heart.

For the first several years, the verses didn't leave Room 128, but Pam and Nicki hoped the songs could eventually benefit all Lower School students. Once again, the Lord provided when Tony Grant, a Bear Creek parent (now Lower School Programming and Math Specialist) suggested releasing them on music streaming services. He and Nicki worked to publish the entire collection, making the Bible memory songs available to all families online.

In 2020, with Pam's encouragement in mind and the Holy Spirit's prompting, Nicki asked Lower School Division Head Kristen Gephart about teaching the songs to the rest of the students in grades K – 4. Kristen immediately agreed. "Yes! That would be wonderful!" Claire Mars, Lower School Chapel worship leader since 2020, welcomed Nicki's support each week. "It has turned out to be a great partnership—[Claire] leads the worship music, and I lead the verse songs." Soon, they started inviting

Nicki's 2018 birthday celebration with Pam Erickson's kindergarten class

any interested students in grades 3 and 4 to help lead worship, and now they have eight or more courageous students on stage with them every week, leading with joyful voices and practiced hand motions so all their peers can follow along.

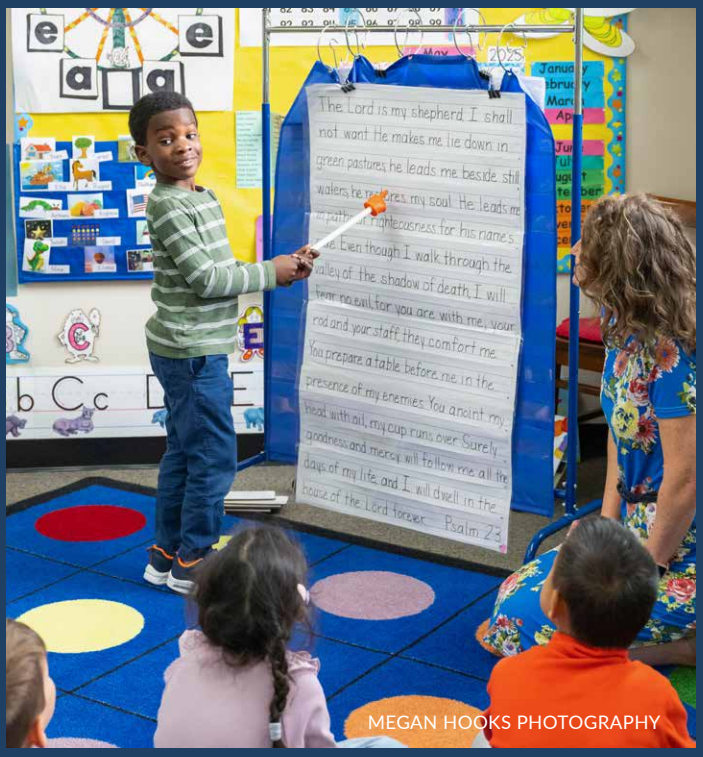
Last year, Nicki wrote a geography song for the kindergarten teaching team. She laughs, "It catches me off guard when they recite the title and add 'written by Mrs. Klimisch'. It's a surreal experience and a bit embarrassing!" Nicki would love to write more music, including a song for each grade level's unique class verse. "I have some of them written already," she says, "but one of the class verses is very long, and it's hard to wrap my mind around it. But if God wants me to write it, then He'll give me the tune."

She still thinks about teaching, but being a classroom assistant has been the right fit. "Since Pam retired, I've been blessed to remain in Room 128 with kindergarteners, working alongside Liz Summerson. We have a lot of fun in there!" She says. "I love reading the Bible [with the students] and bringing it to life." Nicki emphasizes the need for spiritual readiness. "I tell them, 'We need to put on the armor of God. His Word is the sword of the Spirit and our defense against sin. We need to memorize it to sharpen our swords to be ready for battle!'"

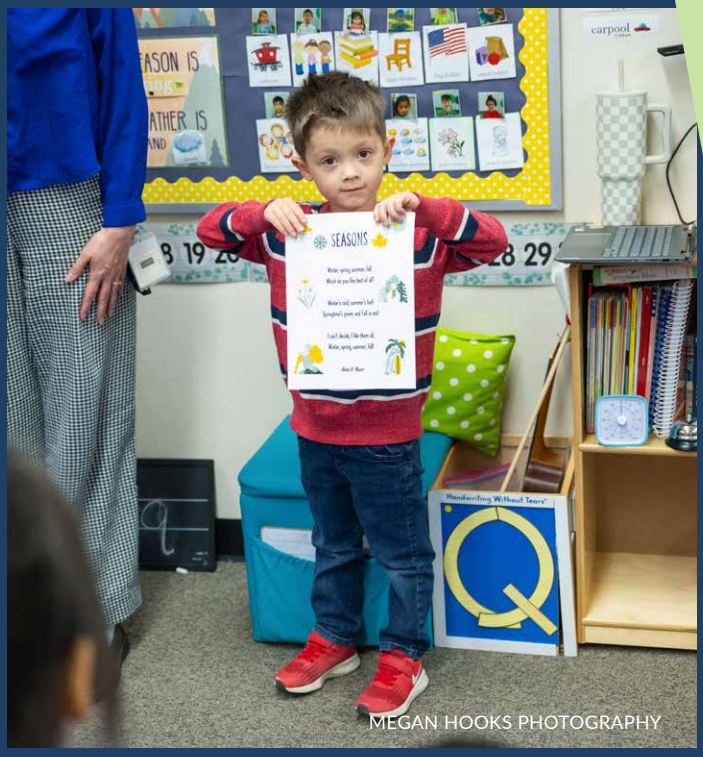
Nicki's prayer is that students will hold these verses in their hearts for the rest of their lives. "Maybe that's why God led me to become a lawyer. I was on a battlefield in litigation, preparing for the real battle—this spiritual battle." She reflects. "If the songs that I write in any way help kids memorize scripture, it is such a blessing to me. That the Lord might use me even in a small way as part of His team is incredibly humbling and honoring. I don't view myself as the songwriter; God writes the songs and puts them in my heart."

Nicki has wondered what might have been different had she sought God's direction earlier. "I should have consulted the Lord before making a career choice, regardless of how many boxes it checked," she reflects. "But even though I didn't, I believe what scripture says in Romans 8:28, '*...in all things God works for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to His purpose.*'" She continues, "I don't regret the path I took, even if it wasn't the one I was meant to stay on. Nothing is wasted. God has used my experiences to shape me for His purposes. It all counted."

As a child, making up songs for her stories, Nicki never imagined it would come so far. She reflects, "I can relate to Gideon [of the Bible] in that, even if you don't feel qualified, if you have a passion to do something for the Lord, I think He honors that. And I can tell you that anything I've done to serve Him has been my most fulfilling work." Nicki strives to live by 1 Corinthians 15:58: "*Whatever you do, give yourself fully to the work of the Lord, because your labor in the Lord is not in vain.*" And Nicki affirms, "All of it counts."



MEGAN HOOKS PHOTOGRAPHY



MEGAN HOOKS PHOTOGRAPHY

FORTITŪDŌ IN PRESCHOOL

BY RACHAEL URBAN, PRESCHOOL DIVISION HEAD

If you have never visited Bear Creek Preschool, I highly encourage you to come spend some time with us (or even become a volunteer)! Not only is there an exorbitant amount of cuteness in one place, but so much growth and learning happen within these walls. It reminds us of the amazing ways God has created our brains. The ages of 0 to 5 are incredibly formative years in a child's development as trillions of neural connections are created through interactions with his or her caregivers, environment, and experiences. Preschool teachers have the privilege of being part of that unique time in a child's life. It is an incredible opportunity to help create foundational building blocks, not only with academically rich content but with valuable social and emotional opportunities as well.

One of those social-emotional areas I love seeing developed in the early years is *fortitūdō* which is Latin for courage or bravery.

So, what does courage look like in preschool?

Courage in preschool looks like stepping into the classroom for the first time and leaving the comfort of mom and dad to be with new friends and teachers. Courage in preschool looks like learning the art of friendship, sharing a story in front of your classmates at circle time, and proudly holding the American flag to lead your class in the Pledge of Allegiance. Courage is praying before snack time, raising your hand and asking for help, and serving as a greeter as families enter through the school gate in the morning. Courage in preschool looks like helping lead Chapel songs in front of over 100 students and teachers, speaking into the microphone, and singing at Moms and Music. Courage is reciting the class Bible verse and performing on the Cornerstone Theater stage in the Redmond Campus' Main building at Christmastime for parents, siblings, and grandparents.

MEGAN HOOKS PHOTOGRAPHY

"At Bear Creek, we have the rare opportunity to see how these cultivated moments of courage compound to make a lifelong impact..."

To an adult, *fortitūdō* in the preschool years may seem insignificant, but the reality is that as students grow, these small acts of courage lead to some pretty big milestones in their development.

We specifically see this in the unique set of skills our students develop in public speaking. One of the benefits of being a preschool through grade 12 school is to witness students' incredible journeys as they progress from preschool to kindergarten and continue all the way through Upper School. This year, during the Class of 2025 Commencement, I was so proud as I listened to Rory Norris speak (see her Commencement speech on page 14). It is no small task, as we all know, to speak in front of a large crowd. Having taught Rory in preschool, I have seen firsthand how all those small but courageous moments have helped shape her during her years here.

At Bear Creek, we have the rare opportunity to see how these cultivated moments of courage compound to make a lifelong impact, and we have the privilege of watching students grow up to become opera singers, doctors, teachers, and more, all benefiting from the courage practiced in their early years. *Fortitūdō* in Preschool—it matters!

WISDOM. COMPASSION. COURAGE.

BY DAVE URBAN,
UPPER SCHOOL
DEAN OF STUDENTS

PHOTO BY
CINDY MCCAHILL

THESE ARE THREE WORDS YOU HEAR A LOT AROUND BEAR CREEK BECAUSE THEY ARE THE THREE WORDS WE HOPE TO SEE A LOT AROUND BEAR CREEK.

It is why we exist—to produce students who will engage the world with wisdom, compassion, and courage.

But what do we actually mean when we say that? Wisdom makes sense, right? It requires wisdom to make the kind of decisions that will keep us on the right path while honoring God and those around us. Compassion? Of course. God calls us to suffer with those who suffer. To comfort those who are hurting. To care for those who need it.

But courage? What? Like standing up to a bully? Not cowering in fear when the once brightly lit path heads into the forest (à la the Cowardly Lion in *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*)? This one can feel more difficult to pin down. But having worked with hundreds of Upper School students these past several years, it is starting to make more sense to me.

Webster defines courage as "mental or moral strength to venture, persevere, and withstand danger, fear, or difficulty." In other words, courage is so powerful because it has little to do with an outcome. It is all about the path, or to use a term from our Philosophical Theology class, "the means." It is more about who a person is becoming than what he or she is achieving.

Which goes back to those outcomes—wisdom, compassion, and courage. These words define how we want our students to live their lives, regardless of what the outcomes may be.

- When students try something new, they are growing in courage.
- When students run for or apply for leadership positions, knowing they may not be elected or selected, they are growing in courage.
- When students press into their convictions and speak up in a class discussion, knowing not everyone will agree with or like what they have to say, they are growing in courage.
- When students admit they were in the wrong, knowing their confessions may lead to some very tangible consequences, they are growing in courage.

Whether through words or actions, when students stand up for what is good, true, and beautiful, even if it means standing alone, they are growing in courage.

This is why I love Bear Creek. We do not simply teach students what courage is or encourage them to be courageous when the opportunities present themselves. We create an environment where courageous living is the air that we breathe. We are not Bear Creek without it. Because again, we know at the end of the day it is not about what they are achieving but who they are becoming.

This is also why I love my job. Bear Creek has not tasked me, as Dean of Students, with "looking after kids." My incredible colleagues and I have been charged to enter the battle with these young men and women, fighting with them to become wise, to become compassionate, and to become courageous.

And the best part? We get to teach (and remind, over and over and over again) our students that the reason they can be courageous in the first place is that they are known and loved by the God who made them because He is with them wherever they go.

HAVE I NOT COMMANDED YOU? BE STRONG AND COURAGEOUS. DO NOT BE AFRAID; DO NOT BE DISCOURAGED, FOR THE LORD YOUR GOD WILL BE WITH YOU WHEREVER YOU GO.

— Joshua 1:9

IT TAKES COURAGE TO READ

BY MORGAN JAMIESON


PAIGE CARRUTH

A student shares an original poem created during Middle School Poetry Slam.

When students transition into middle school, research shows a significant drop in students who read for enjoyment. The U.S. Department of Education's National Assessment of Educational Progress reports that, in 2023, only 14% of 13-year-olds said they read for fun "almost every day," a 13-point shock downward from 27% in 2012. Worse still, the number of 13-year-olds who reported they "never, or hardly ever" read for fun on their own time in 2023 reached an all-time high of 31% (in 1984, when this information was first collected, it was only 9%). Reading for leisure competes with everything else: more challenging classes, additional responsibilities, extracurriculars, and limited free time, not to mention the distractions of our digital age. Especially during the crucial middle school years, encouraging students to take up interest in reading requires deliberate effort.

Our welcoming, student-friendly C.E. "Ted" Kindel and Ida Lairson libraries are significant in inviting Middle School and Lower School student interest in the library's collection. Both libraries were beautifully remodeled several years ago with new and inviting layouts, updated seating, interactive kiosks, and imaginative murals thanks to the generosity of our community, and circulation statistics have shown a marked increase since the remodel. For Bear Creek students in grades 5 and 6, enjoying the library is a part of their scheduled weekly specialist classes when they browse the shelves and build habits of independent reading. But in grades 7 and 8, when library is no longer a scheduled class, students must take initiative to use it.

"Sometimes students come in to play chess or hang out because it's a quiet space," says Dr. Katy Steinkraus, Middle School Literacy and Innovation Lead. "But even just coming in and spending time here takes a little bit of courage."

During the middle school years, students are concerned with forming identities, seeking independence, exploring new interests, and building friendships. Social connection matters more than ever, and reading, often seen as a solo activity, can feel at odds with the social world that students are

Katy and Middle School grade 7 Latin and logic teacher Josie LeQuatte present awards at the Middle School Poetry Slam.

navigating. "We have to figure out how to honor that part of middle school identity—how important it is to be social—while still celebrating the fact that everyone reads different things, at different paces, and at different levels," Katy explains.

For some Middle School students, the library is out of sight and out of mind. Dr. Steinkraus introduced the bookmobile cart to meet students where they are. She stocks the cart with forward-facing books, carefully chosen for their appealing covers "because we do judge books by their covers," she explains, and intentionally parks at the top of the stairs so Middle School students can check books out on the spot. "I do my best to call them out by name," she says. The bookmobile increases circulation and helps reduce overdue books, and it is great for students who do not often make their way to the library.

Katy often finds that students are far more likely to pick up a book if reading is part of a visible, shared experience. That is why the library invests in opt-in programs and events to make reading feel more communal, fun, and worth doing.

POETRY SLAM

One of these is Poetry Slam, held each fall. "People hear 'poetry slam' and think black turtlenecks and beatniks, but we're less traditional than that," Katy explains. Poetry Slam is a two-hour after-school event, complete with snacks and a microphone, and Upper School students volunteer to help put it on. The first hour is for creation: students move through different stations to explore various poetry styles such as haiku, tanka, blackout poetry, limericks, and the American style called golden shovel. "It's basically

JANEEN SORENSEN

After answering a book trivia question correctly, students bowl to earn additional points for their team during Grades 5 and 6 Battle of the Books.

about getting kids to realize that poetry doesn't have to be formal. It doesn't have to rhyme. It can be about whatever your life is about," she says. Students enjoy activities like creating blackout poetry, where they black out words on a page to create new poems, and read humorous haiku from *The Panda Is Fat*, which was a favorite last year. Each station encourages creativity and lowers the intimidation factor that often comes with poetry. "Why be afraid of writing poetry when there's a fat panda writing a haiku about how fat he is?" Katy muses.

Every participant is encouraged to get up and read at least once. "It takes a really big step in courage," she describes. "Even if they just read somebody else's poem or something really short … But that's okay because it's all stepping out there, experimenting, and enjoying poetry."

BATTLE OF THE BOOKS

Battle of the Books (B.O.B.) is another highly anticipated event and has long been part of Bear Creek's library program. It began as a trivia competition based on books from a national list, but over time, it has evolved to be less about competition and more about fun. Now, there are separate programs for grade 4, grades 5 – 6, and grades 7 – 8, with different book lists tailored to each group, which students read in advance of the battle. Students form their own teams (usually with friends), and while it still uses trivia, the program also includes games like bowling, scooter relays, and "Minute to Win It" challenges, which often relate in some way to books. For example, one year, a book titled *Rules* featuring a rubber duck on the cover inspired a rubber duck-toss game. Teachers promote the program by stocking B.O.B. books in their classrooms and encouraging students to sign up for the after-school event. Anyone in grades 5 – 8 can sign up to participate, and grade 4 students participate in their battle during the school day.

Students played a "Minute to Win It" challenge of flipping pennies during the Grades 5 and 6 Battle of the Books.

Each Battle of the Books team creates a digital poster of their team's name using the words from the titles of the B.O.B. books.

READING CHALLENGES

Resuming this fall, each month will bring a new reading challenge checklist for Middle School students to complete for rewards such as stickers, bookmarks, fidget toys, and even the chance to design their own buttons. They are little creative challenges such as read a book by an author whose first name begins with A or read a book with more than 10 words in the title. "You really have to hunt to find those," Katy says. These challenges continue through the summer, too, with versions for grades K – 4 as well.

The library's summer reading program is also a way to keep readers exploring new books over the summer. The summer checklist challenge includes prompts like read under a tree, read a cookbook, or read something recommended by your parents. For the A-to-Z Super Challenge, students can read books where either the title or author's name starts with each letter of the alphabet. "It's a different way to discover books and encourages a bit of adventure," Katy says. Middle School students who complete the summer checklist challenge earn donuts in the library and a free dress day in the fall.

ACCELERATED READER®

The Accelerated Reader® (AR) program is another way the library celebrates students in grades K – 8 who are quietly reading on their own. AR is a national, computer-based reading incentive program that measures reading comprehension. The program covers a wide range of ages and interests, ranging from very simple books like *The Cat in the Hat* all the way up to *War and Peace*. After finishing a book, students can take a short comprehension quiz and earn points, depending on both the book's difficulty and how well they do on the quiz. Students aim for "point clubs" with milestones that vary by grade level. "For some kids, this is really motivating." Top point-earners are displayed on the digital screens in the libraries and honored at the school's awards assemblies at the end of the year. Participation is completely optional, and students who reach a particularly high point club level get new books added to the library in their honor with their names inside. "They get to keep the books over the summer and then bring them back, and the books become part of our collection," Katy explains.

LIBRARY CLUB

The library also offers a lunchtime library club for grades 7 and 8 students. Students bring their lunches and spend time doing book-related or creative activities such as book folding, designing puzzles, "judge a book by its cover," and makerspace experiments like paper circuits, which uses batteries and LED lights with copper tape to create simple

JANEEN SORENSEN

Above and below: Grade 6 students browse during the Secret Garden Book Fair.

circuits in books. “It’s different every time, and it’s completely opt-in,” she notes. Any grade 7 or 8 student can join (no sign-up required) by simply coming to the Kindel Library at the start of lunch and staying through the period.

BOOK FAIR

JANEEN SORENSEN

The Book Fair is held annually in December. The Ida Lairson Library transforms into a winter wonderland and hosts a temporary Eastside outpost for Secret Garden Books from Seattle’s Ballard neighborhood. The fair runs for one week, and families are encouraged to come shop together. Teachers make wish lists, and many students find new favorites they wouldn’t have picked up otherwise. “It’s a big promotion of literacy,” Katy says. “But buying is not a requirement—everybody’s welcome to come in and browse.”

VISITING AUTHORS

Another highlight of the year is visiting authors. The libraries’ visiting author program brings real-world writers directly to students in grades K – 8, creating memorable connections that encourage both reading and writing. Last year’s Middle School visiting author was Kirby Larson, and next year, Jennifer Nielsen, a

Visiting author Kirby Larson leads a writing workshop with the grades 7 and 8 Creative Writing class.

prominent historical fiction writer, is scheduled to visit. The author gives a large group presentation about his or her writing process, then smaller groups, such as the grades 7 – 8 Creative Writing class, participate in writing workshops with Q&A, writing tips, and creative exercises. "It's really meant to honor the fact that these students chose writing as an elective—and they get to meet a real author who's paving the way," Katy explains.

IT TAKES A LEADER

In middle school, reading becomes more than just an academic skill; it becomes a social decision. That is why the library creates fun opportunities to motivate and encourage students' curiosity about books. But even with these offerings, there are still students the library rarely sees unless a friend brings them. In programs like B.O.B., participation often hinges on peer leaders encouraging their friends to join. "You need someone willing to be a leader of their friends, to spearhead it," Dr. Steinkraus observes. "I recognize that's very typical middle school behavior, but I'd love to see more kids willing to step out, encourage others, and lead—and for their peers to be willing to join them," she continues. "Courage plays a big role."

ENCOURAGING READING AT HOME

The word *encourage*—which shares the same root—means to give someone heart, or strength, to act. In early years, when bedtime stories and family reading times are a part of the regular routine at home, children are naturally encouraged to seek books that are fun and challenging. By middle school, after basic reading fluency is reached, reading as a family often slips into the background. If there is one thing Katy would encourage families to try, it is to keep reading as a family affair, even after children can read independently. "I think it's about finding ways that work with your child and your parenting style," Katy says. Whether it is setting aside time for audiobooks, keeping a rotation of good books available at home, or visiting the library together, parents can start routines to make books a visible, shared priority. "We would love to see families visiting the library together," Katy says. "Come in to find books and talk to librarians! The library is for parents as well as students."

The Kindel Library is a place where Middle School students are encouraged to rediscover their joy in reading. Whether that means joining a club, reading a classic, standing up at the mic, or saying "yes" to a new challenge, it is a space for students to opt in, try something new, and find the courage to read.

TEACHING COURAGE IN LOWER SCHOOL

BY TRACY WHITFIELD
LOWER SCHOOL DEAN OF STUDENTS

WHEN WE THINK ABOUT COURAGE, our minds often jump to those brave figures, such as firefighters, soldiers, or astronauts, who face danger head-on in their careers. While these individuals certainly exemplify courage, at The Bear Creek School we know that courage is not reserved for a select few. Instead, we believe every individual is called by God to be courageous. Courage may look different for each person, but it is no less significant.

As adults, we understand that life is full of challenges. The Bible reminds us of this truth in James 1:2-4, which encourages us to "consider it pure joy … whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance." For our younger students in Lower School, each day presents its own set of challenges—academic, social, emotional—and each one is an opportunity to practice courage.

Every day, acts of courage unfold in our Lower School classrooms, hallways, and recess areas. These are not small or insignificant moments. They are powerful, formative experiences that shape our students' character and faith. For many of our young learners, these experiences are firsts. They don't yet have a

JANEEN SORENSEN

Cub Scouts from Bear Creek's Pack 581 lead pledges during the Lower School Veterans Day Assembly presented by grade 4.


CINDY MCCAHILL

A grade 1 student is presented with a Growing in Virtue award during Lower School Chapel.

CINDY MCCAHILL

CINDY MCCAHILL

Left: A kindergarten student leads the Pledge to the Bible.

Above: Grades 2 and 3 students sing during Lower School Mothers Tea.

JANEEN SORENSEN

A grade 1 student participates in the All-School Spelling Bee.

bank of past situations from which to draw, thus they are navigating new territory with bravery and trust.

It is inspiring to witness how God uses these moments to teach and grow our students. Each challenge they face is a stepping stone towards becoming the individuals He has created them to be. From the earliest grades, we see how their minds and hearts are being prepared to engage with the world, and we rejoice in the glimpses God gives us of who each child is becoming through the choices he or she makes today.

Here are just a few examples of courage we saw in Lower School last year:

- Admitting to doing something unkind, even when it's hard
- Confessing to taking a friend's toy and then making it right
- Leading pledges at Chapel in front of peers
- Reciting a weekly poem or Bible verse to a parent volunteer
- Standing on the risers at Mothers Tea with hundreds of people watching
- Participating in the All-School Spelling Bee alongside students as old as age 14
- Choosing not to copy a friend who is breaking a school rule

These moments may seem small to an adult, but for a child, they are monumental because they require

Grade 4 students speak to mothers during Lower School Mothers Tea.

CINDY MCCAHILL

thought, vulnerability, integrity, and strength. They are the building blocks of a courageous life.

As a school community, we often reflect on how our mission is lived out across all divisions. When Middle School students recite poetry at the Grade 5 Poetry Breakfast, it takes courage that was first nurtured when they stood in the Lower School hallway reciting a poem to a parent volunteer. When a Middle School or Upper School student speaks up against peer pressure, that bravery was first practiced when they used Kelso's Choice conflict management lessons to resolve a playground dispute in first grade. And when our articulate and thoughtful seniors present their Senior Capstone Projects, they are drawing on the courage they developed years ago while leading pledges in Lower School Chapel.

It is beautiful to see how God uses these "small" opportunities to prepare our students for the future. By intentionally nurturing courage in our students, we are equipping them not only for academic success but for a life of purpose, integrity, and faith. Our school provides a safe and nurturing environment where each child can develop courage in an age-appropriate way. With each decision and lesson learned, we pray they draw closer to God and better understand how to be His ambassadors in our school community and beyond. May we continue to walk alongside them as they grow into the brave, compassionate individuals God intends.

GRATITUDE GALA 2025

YOUR GENEROSITY helped to raise more than $920,000 to create spaces that will:

INSPIRE YOUNG MINDS with an interactive floor projector system which will transform early learning at Preschool into a dynamic, hands-on experience.

ENHANCE LEARNING by transforming the physical classroom environment by replacing and improving the quality of light in classrooms.

EMPOWER INTERACTIVE LEARNING with new classroom

COURTESY PHOTOS

Glitz & Glam

technology—and replace aging technologies—which will ensure every teacher and student has access to the best learning tools.

IMPROVE ENGAGEMENT by adding mobile interactive panels and immersive upgrades in Lower School and Middle School classrooms and state-of-the-art projectors in Upper School classrooms.

ADVANCE INNOVATION with upgraded tech in the Upper School Innovation Lab which will foster creativity and hands-on problem-solving.

SINI FERNANDEZ

Whitney Isbell

Class of 2015

BY CLAIRE DAVIS

ASSISTANT DIRECTOR OF ALUMNI RELATIONS

COURTESY PHOTO

Whitney Isbell's journey to earn her master's degree was a leap of faith from uncertainty to triumph. It stands as a testament to the power of resilience and belief in oneself. Whitney recently graduated with a Master of Science in Business Analytics from Wake Forest University in Winston-Salem, NC.

"I'm very proud of myself for having the courage to move across the country and sign myself up for something so difficult," she shares.

Due to the scale and academic rigor of her program, Whitney describes graduate school as both the most difficult and most rewarding time in her life. In addition to academics, she served in student leadership, played intramural sports, and worked as a graduate school consultant as part of her practicum.

"If anything, my time in graduate school proved to myself that I was capable of more than I previously thought, and that was an extremely gratifying feeling," Whitney shares.

Whitney credits Bear Creek with giving her the academic foundation necessary to succeed in her studies. "The knowledge of how to study, how to ask questions, and how to engage with teachers is invaluable—not only in academic pursuits, but also in work and life."

Several teachers motivated and inspired her, leaving a lasting impact. "Mr. Davison was particularly influential as a critical thinker. He taught me how to challenge my own beliefs and find interest in philosophy." Similarly, Ms. Ballou's A.P. Statistics class left a strong impression on Whitney, and it was Ms. Ballou who later wrote a letter of recommendation for her graduate school application.

Whitney also reflects on her struggles with mental health during high school and the support she received at Bear Creek. "I will always remember the love they showed me during the times I needed it most," she says. To current students who may be going through similar challenges, Whitney offers this advice: "It's okay and normal to feel sad, scared, and stressed. However, try to only worry about what is within your control, and life will get better."

Today, Whitney works at D.A. Davidson and is focused on becoming a registered client associate. Her long-term goal is to combine her analytical skills with her financial knowledge. "Ultimately, I hope to build a successful career around what interests me," she shares. "It was at Bear Creek where I first developed a strong sense of ambition and the drive to pursue my interests. The school's emphasis on intellectual curiosity laid the foundation for my career path."

Whitney's story shows how taking risks and persevering through challenges can lead to the most rewarding outcomes. From Bear Creek to graduate school and beyond, each step has helped Whitney gain confidence and discover more of her many, growing capabilities.

Jill Jani

Parent of Alumni

BY CLAIRE DAVIS

ASSISTANT DIRECTOR OF ALUMNI RELATIONS


COURTESY PHOTO

Imagine walking into a school where the presence of the Holy Spirit is palpable, and every corner exudes warmth and welcome. This is what many Bear Creek families experience, and it was especially so for Jill Jani and her family. "When Jeff and I walked in, we just knew this was a special place for our kids," Jill recalls.

The Jani family had done extensive research, touring several other private Christian schools. Jeff and Jill were looking for a place where their children, Parker '21 and Savanna '25, could thrive both academically and spiritually. "Parker and Savanna have worked so hard to get to where they are today, and they have loved attending The Bear Creek School." Jill shares, "It's a big deal when your kids love where they are."

One of the unique aspects of Bear Creek is our emphasis on parental involvement. "You can pay to educate your kids anywhere, but Bear Creek gives you the opportunity to see that education in practice," Jill says. Jeff and Jill became room parents, contributing to the school community and building lifelong relationships. The school's open-arms policy encourages parents to share their gifts.

When it comes to raising children, Jill likes the concept of the three-legged stool (parents, school, church). Each element is crucial, and together they provide stability and balance. She believes that Bear Creek fulfilled a crucial role in the "important and cohesive support system" for her children.

For parents of soon-to-be alums, Jill offers a thoughtful reflection, "You will see the value of all the time that has been invested. In those final months before your child graduates, you see the culmination of it all."

Reflecting on her family's experience, Jill feels an overwhelming sense of gratitude. "The Lord brought us here and gave us this experience. There couldn't be a better place," she says. Bear Creek's distinctive approach to parental involvement and strong community make it a truly special school.

ALL ALUMNI

are invited to celebrate our

Upper School Building's 10th Anniversary

Gather with us to reconnect, reminisce, and relive cherished memories from your time on campus.

October 25

2:00 PM – 4:00 PM

MIDDLE SCHOOL GRANDPARENTS DAY

IN SPRING 2025, we celebrated the special bond between grandparents and our students in grades 5 – 8. Grandparents Day is a wonderful way for grandparents to experience their grandchild's school life and see what makes Bear Creek unique.

PHOTOS BY JANEEN SORENSEN

INVEST IN THE FUTURE

Legacy giving is a powerful way to make an impact on tomorrow's world through the education of future Christian leaders—individuals prepared to engage the world with wisdom, compassion, and courage. Your thoughtful planning to advance the mission of The Bear Creek School will make a difference in the world your children, grandchildren, and even great-grandchildren will inherit.

If you have already made a provision for The Bear Creek School in your will or estate plan, please let us know so we may say thank you and recognize your generosity by welcoming you into our Legacy Circle of like-minded donors.

For more information about making a legacy gift in your will or through life insurance, property, or other assets, contact Mariana Keller, Vice President for Philanthropy and Community Engagement, at mkeller@tbcs.org or 425-898-1720 ext. 340.

THE BEAR CREEK SCHOOL

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