A Community of Belonging

Inside the Transformative Power of JPII's Hand in Hand Program

We are living out a profound mission — one that embraces the full dignity of every individual. Since 2004, JPII's Hand in Hand Options (HIHO) program has opened its doors to students with intellectual and developmental disabilities, making Catholic high school education accessible to students who may not otherwise thrive in a traditional college preparatory environment.

More than a program, HIHO is a living testament to what authentic inclusion looks like, one rooted in justice, faith, and the belief that every person has a God-given purpose, as evidenced by the four most recent 2025 graduates from the program: Victoria Griffin, Adaline Hamlin, Ra'Shad Hunter, and Abram Speshock.

"We don't want it to be the best-kept secret anymore," said Toni Richards, mother of senior Adaline Hamlin. "This program is transformational, not just for the students in it, but for the entire school community."

A Full High School Experience

Students in the HIHO program are deeply woven into the fabric of life at JPII. With the support of peer mentors, they attend as many core and elective classes as possible, and their high school experience mirrors that of their typical peers, from joining clubs and sports to leading in the arts, faith life, and student media.

For example, Adaline Hamlin is a vibrant student known for her voice in the women's choir, her altar service during Mass, and her contributions in yearbook. Adaline is also a celebrated innovator. In 2022, she won the Tennessee State "STEM for All" Award for designing an accessible lunch tray for students with disabilities, and her story was featured on the local news.

"I felt surprised to see my project win the award," Adaline said. "It made me happy because my whole family is so proud of me."

Adaline didn't stop there. From earning an arts honor cord to being elected Prom Queen, she truly

experienced high school to its fullest, something her mother never took for granted.

"At other schools, everyone saw Down syndrome first. At JPII, they saw Adaline," Richards shared. "The moment we visited, students talked to her. The faculty asked her what she wanted to do. That had never happened before."

A Culture of Compassion and Confidence

JPII's HIHO program does more than provide an education; it builds community. Through the Peer Mentor program, inclusion isn't just about placing students in the same classroom; it's about cultivating authentic friendships and mutual respect. For students like Victoria Griffin, this made all the difference.

"Victoria had the chance to be in general education classes and was treated like any other student," said her mother Malinda Griffin. "The letters she received from her peer buddies each year were so heartfelt. JPII allowed her to fully experience high school."

Victoria's passion for visual art was celebrated through her participation in the Arts uKnighted visual arts exhibition. She also joined the cheer team, thanks to her HIHO teacher Kim Shaver, who shared a video of her previous performances with the school's coach Suzanne Calvin. She was included, encouraged, and empowered every step of the way.

"Art is my passion," Victoria said. "And my favorite part of JPII was going to class with my friends."

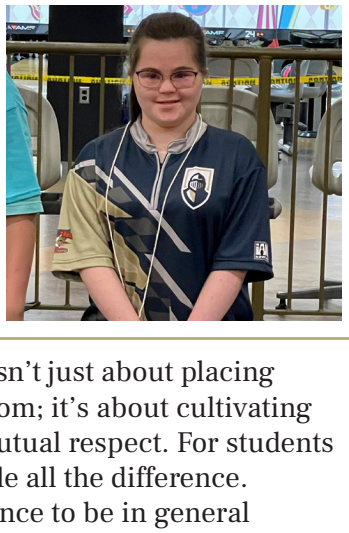
Media Stars and Campus Leaders

Ra'Shad Hunter found his spotlight on Knights TV, the school's broadcast program, where he became known for his high energy and infectious joy.

"Knights TV was an avenue for him to share his energy and love with the school," said Kyle Reynolds, Knights TV adviser. "He's the kid who walks in and lights up the room."

Ra'Shad's mother LaVonda Johnson reflected on the deep sense of community he found at JPII. "He was bullied in elementary school, but here, he's loved, not just by students, but by teachers, staff, and even parents," she said. "It's a school where kids are intentionally included. That's rare."

Ra'Shad also participated in the gaming club, community service, and even summer camps, helping younger students in athletics. "He's kind, accepting, and grounded in faith, and this school nurtured those qualities," his mother added.



Excellence on the Field and Beyond

Abram Speshock, a standout athlete in track and field, exemplifies perseverance. As a four-year member of the team, he threw shot put and discus, improving his performance each year and qualifying for regional competition. He also served as basketball team manager and worked at Publix during high school.

His mother, Tiffany Speshock, described how JPII became a safe place where Abram was truly seen.

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"He wasn't just included; he was celebrated. I could drop him off at a football game and know he was loved and safe. That's the kind of peace this community gives you," she said.

Abram treasured the letters from his peer mentors, keeping them by his bed and reading them nightly. "He became a more joyful and confident person," his mother said. "That kind of growth is rare, and it's because JPII understands how to live out the Gospel."

This fall, Abram will work as a counselor-in-training at Camp Marymount and continue his journey toward becoming a park ranger, a dream made possible by a community that believed in him.

The Broader Impact

The stories of Adaline, Victoria, Ra'Shad, and Abram are more than anecdotes; they're the heartbeat of the way our school lives its Catholic mission fully. Inclusion at JPII is a justice-centered expression of our faith.

"People ask about the cost of running a program like HIHO," Richards said. "Yes, it takes more resources. But the return, the compassion, the confidence, the community, is priceless."

The impact extends beyond the students in the program. Peer mentors gain lifelong skills in empathy and advocacy. Parents witness their children not just survive high school, but thrive. And the community is reminded that human dignity is not based on ability, but on being created in the image of God.

As Victoria's mother said, "At JPII, she was never held back. She got to be herself: fully, freely, and faithfully."

For the HIHO students, graduation may mark the end of high school, but not of community. They plan to stay involved by volunteering at events, participating in alumni activities, and continuing to model what it means to live with joy and purpose.

"I think the biggest gift JPII gave Adaline," Richards reflected, "was the confidence to know that her presence matters, not just in the classroom, but in the world."

HIHO teacher Kim Shaver stated, "The students in our Hand in Hand Program have made a very meaningful and lasting impact on the school community in many significant ways. They have contributed to the overall life of the school within the classroom, clubs, sports, and the arts. Their impact was seen in the everyday moments of connection with others and the mutual respect that defines our school's spirit."

And in a world that often struggles to embrace difference, the Hand in Hand Options program at JPII is a powerful reminder of what's possible when faith, education, love, and community walk together.

For more information about the HIHO program at JPII, please contact HIHO teacher Kim Shaver (kim.shaver@@jp2prep.org).