



# BECAUSE *we are* CATHOLIC

## Principal motivates, encourages fun, success at St. Peter's School in Southern Maryland

St. Peter's School principal J.R. West enjoys his job. So much, in fact, that he was willing to have lunch on the school roof and be the target in a dunk tank.

"I tell the students all the time, 'It is not written that school has to be a horrible experience,'" said West, who is in his seventh year as principal at the Waldorf school. "It can be fun. My mantra has always been 'Work Hard, Play Hard'. They get that."

This school year, St. Peter's qualified as a Blue Ribbon school for academic excellence. The Charles County school ranks in the top 15 percent in the nation for standardized testing in reading and math.

"I have an incentive for reading and math with different-colored dog tags depending on how many books you read and different-colored medals depending on how many math objectives are met. That has helped drive us to the top 15 percent," West said. "We had to turn those programs around to make it fun. I started out with a challenge. If they could read 5,000 books for the year, I would shave my hair pink and into a Mohawk. That got everybody on board. The next year I asked for 6,000 books and went into the dunk tank. The following year I invited the kids who finished with the most math objectives to eat lunch on the school roof.

"Last year, I didn't have any incentive for the school and without me having to do anything like shaving my head or having lunch on the roof, they read 8,000 books because they found the love and joy of what reading can be. We figured out how to break the code and got kids interested in reading things they like and then all of a sudden they start liking to read no matter what is in front of them."

St. Peter's School was established by Rev. Henry Sank in 1956 as the first Catholic school in Southern Maryland that was never racially segregated. Many of the current students are children from military families, given the school's proximity to Andrews



*J.R. West, principal of St. Peter's School in Waldorf, eats lunch on the roof with several of his students.*

Air Force Base and the Pentagon. West, a Marine Colonel, is the perfect person to lead this group.

"God sent me here," West said. "As a Marine colonel, I know how to motivate people, and as a father of two, I know how to motivate kids. We have a lot of military families coming and going; that is why we put on a big Veteran's Day event. A lot of the parents show up and we run a slide show where every student sends in pictures of their Mom and Dad in uniform. It really makes it personal!"

St. Peter's offers numerous extracurricular activities, including a daily television show produced by the students. Each school day begins with the morning news and announcements.

"It has turned out much better than I thought," West said. "Kids are getting involved and those who are shining are not the smartest or the greatest athletes. It has become a venue for kids who have been hidden for years. They write the stories and are the anchors. We have people in front of and behind the camera. I try to make this a fun environment. If you like what you are doing, obviously you are going to do a better job. We have a lot more to do here but we are moving in the right direction."

THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN MARYLAND SERVES AND ADVOCATES FOR THE POOR, VULNERABLE AND THOSE IN NEED NOT BECAUSE THEY ARE CATHOLIC, BUT BECAUSE WE ARE CATHOLIC.