

CATALYST

ST. MARCUS SCHOOL MAGAZINE • SUMMER 2026

"How Three-Year-Olds
at St. Marcus

Outgrow
the Benchmarks"

p. 7

Nyree's story started in K3



Dear Friends,

We’re entering a season in which one question gets asked frequently: “So, Henry, are you nervous? Are vouchers in danger?” When a gubernatorial candidate endorsed by the state’s largest teachers’ union states,

“We will work to bring the failed, unaccountable voucher scheme to a responsible end”¹ it is understandable why many families and educators feel uncertain.

Add to that the ongoing litigation challenging Wisconsin’s school funding system, combined with a shifting political and policy landscape, the challenges about the future of school choice are real. So yes, vouchers are threatened, but am I nervous? Not one bit.

There are half a dozen reasons not to be nervous. Chief among them is the Biblical imperative to “have no anxiety about anything,” and Solomon’s exhortation to “Trust in the Lord with all your heart; lean not on your own understanding, in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight.” (Philippians 4:6 & Proverbs 3:5-6) We have witnessed miracle after miracle over the past 24 years. I am not concerned.

But faith doesn’t mean inaction. My favorite book of the Bible is Nehemiah. Against all odds, Nehemiah rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem after they had been destroyed. Just as real progress began, violent opposition arose from among those who favored the status quo. Nehemiah’s response was not to worry; it was to pray to God **and** keep building. hilariously, the workers on the wall worked with a tool in one hand and a weapon in the other. I love that image.

Of far greater concern is the report released by City Forward Collective, “Milwaukee’s North Side Education Crisis: A Generation of Failure Demands Action.” If you haven’t read it yet, I encourage you to do so. It’s the greatest concern because it’s not about politics or school systems. It’s about **kids** and the rampant educational failure on the north side of Milwaukee. This is where I choose to focus my energy and attention. Despite the headlines, there are enormous reasons for optimism:

- St. Marcus students are thriving. In May, 95% of the 2022 graduating class graduated from high school. Imagine a city with a 95% black high school graduation rate!
- Another cohort of 85 students just graduated, prepared for success spiritually, academically, and behaviorally.
- The North Side Crisis report names schools like St. Marcus and Milwaukee College Prep as proof points of what is possible when schools are relentlessly committed to their students’ success.
- Curriculum upgrades, parent empowerment programs, and an intense focus on early childhood literacy are bearing fruit. During the 25-26 school year, internal and external measures of academic performance are all trending upwards.
- Through Private Schools for Quality Education, St. Marcus is collaborating with a group of other high-performing private schools to drive educational reform, expand the number of high-quality seats, and advocate for quality and accountability across all educational sectors.
- Over 29,000 students now use vouchers in Milwaukee, and more than 60,000 students statewide. If opposition comes, an army of parents will be ready to advocate for the right to choose the best school for their children.

So, let’s double down in praying for our city and remain committed to the vision of every child in Milwaukee having access to a great school. The progress we celebrate today is possible because God has worked through faithful friends like you. Your prayers, generosity, advocacy, and encouragement transform lives and create new possibilities for children across Milwaukee.

I remain convinced that God can do this. I’m also convinced that He has called us to be His hands and feet. Together, we can ensure that more children experience the hope, opportunity, and education they deserve. The next generation of kids can’t wait. Let’s go!

God Bless,

Henry Tyson
Superintendent

City Forward Collective
Report: Milwaukee’s North
Side Education Crisis:
A Generation of Failure
Demands Action.



tinyurl.com/northside-report

¹ Kelda Roys, statement following WEAC endorsement, April 14, 2026, reported by Civic Media and Urban Milwaukee.

Walking Across the Stage: Celebrating the Class of 2026

On Saturday, May 23, the St. Marcus School community gathered for its 149th Commencement Ceremony to celebrate the graduating eighth-grade classes from the North Avenue and Center Street campuses.

Each campus chose a Bible verse for their graduating year. North Avenue selected Ephesians 5:15-17: *“So be careful how you live. Don’t live like fools, but like those who are wise. Make the most of every opportunity in these evil days. Don’t act thoughtlessly, but understand what the Lord wants you to do.”* Center Street chose Matthew 5:16: *“In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.”*



North Avenue student speaker Sha'Kylah, a St. Marcus scholar since K3, opened with a J. Cole lyric and a challenge to her classmates: stop comparing your life to someone else’s and start cherishing the one God gave you.

She talked about the school’s emphasis on putting yourself third, behind God and others, and how that framework shaped the way her class thinks about service.

She also took time to thank her mom, who has gotten up every morning since Sha'Kylah was three to take her to school. She thanked her coaches for pushing her to break records and stay mentally strong as a student-athlete, and she thanked the teachers and deans who made middle school unforgettable. She closed with words her classmates will recognize: **“As Mr. Mandeville would say, you are loved, you are redeemed, and you are here for a purpose.”**

Center Street student speaker Nyla, a High Honor Roll student heading to Dominican High School, reflected on the friendships built over four years in middle school. She recalled a fifth-grade camping trip where the whole class bonded over coyote howls and fishing and realized they had found their people. Standing at the podium, Nyla urged her classmates to carry those relationships and their faith forward, to use their gifts and character to serve others and reflect God’s love.



The North Avenue class selected Mr. Micah Ricke to deliver their “Last Word.” His Word of God class was one that scholars looked forward to daily, and his send-off matched that energy.

He delivered the whole thing in rhyming verse, cycling through the nicknames he had given every student over the years. Then it turned serious. He reminded the graduates that they are the Class of 2030 in the eyes of the future and challenged them to keep their faith close as they enter high school.

Center Street's "Last Word" came from Mrs. Crystal Tolbert, who joined the St. Marcus family in January but quickly recognized the character of the class she had stepped into. She named individual scholars and matched each to a fruit of the Spirit: joy through Mason, Elijah, Marcel, and Martz; peace through Deshanti, Josiah, Zion R., and Aan; patience through Verila, Videl, Anala, McKenzie, and Zion J.; kindness through Jada, Shane, Germaine, Kaye, and Zamaya. "When we all allow Jesus to shine in us, we drive out darkness," she told them. "Be bold and courageous. For the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go."

Before diplomas were handed out, Middle School Director Kurt Stielow and Dean of Students Robert Boyd highlighted what this class accomplished outside of academics. At North Avenue, both the boys and girls basketball teams made it to state. The track and field team also sent athletes to state, finishing in the top three in the girls 4x100, boys 4x100, boys 4x400, and shotput. At Center Street, the girls volleyball team, made up largely of eighth graders, had an especially strong season.

The faith milestones were just as significant. 25 students were confirmed in the weeks leading up to graduation, and across both campuses, 29 students were baptized during their time at St. Marcus. These are young people who chose to claim their faith as their own before stepping into the next chapter.

Legacy families who have been sending students to St. Marcus for 15 or more years were called by name: the Bradshaw, Jashinsky, Vaughn, Barry, and Cain families among them.



Alumni connections run through this class, too. Two scholars, Shane and Deshawn, are both sons of St. Marcus graduates who are now graduates themselves. And many of the students crossing the stage had been enrolled since K3 or K4, meaning their St. Marcus story started when they were three years old.

Superintendent Henry Tyson presented the diplomas, but not before pausing to thank the parents and grandparents in the room. "Getting through this school can be challenging," he said. "Thank you for letting us partner with you as the secondary educator of your children. Everything that is good that's going on up here is in large part because of your work."

More than 70 graduates crossed the stage, headed to high schools across the Milwaukee area: Dominican, Wisconsin Lutheran, Milwaukee Lutheran, Martin Luther, Kingdom Prep, Augustine Prep North, Rufus King, Nicolet, Wauwatosa West, Golda Meir, Shorewood, Divine Savior Holy Angels, and others.

Dean Lasae Simpson closed the ceremony the way it began: in prayer.

He asked every parent in the building to stand, and together they prayed over their children. He prayed for protection over the neighborhoods these kids call home, for strength through the summer and into high school, and for the graduates to be different because of the Word they have received.

"We believe that St. Marcus has played a small part in changing the lives of these young people for the better as they go out into this world," he prayed.

And with that, the Class of 2026 was sent out.

Congratulations



**St. Marcus
Class of
2026**

Empty Bowls, Full Hearts

Last year, art teacher Hannah Greene applied for something that had never existed at St. Marcus before: a chapter of the National Elementary Art Honors Society.

Greene, a member of the National Art Education Association, saw the NEAHS pilot program as a way to push the school's art program beyond the classroom walls. The pilot is designed to foster leadership and service through art in elementary schools, and Greene knew it was the right fit. She had a personal goal of connecting St. Marcus scholars with the community around them this school year, and NEAHS gave her a framework to do it.

Out of hundreds of applicants, St. Marcus was selected.

When it came time to plan the chapter's first service project, Greene landed on Empty Bowls, a national model where handmade ceramic bowls are sold to raise money for hunger relief. She put out a call on Facebook looking for a kiln, and friends of St. Marcus at Glaze Pottery in Thiensville answered. They came to St. Marcus twice: once to help scholars make the bowls and again to glaze them.



The timing lined up with a larger need. After a series of government shutdowns affected food stamp access, St. Marcus Lutheran Church launched a food drive to collect 2,000 pounds of food for Nourish MKE, a network of community food centers. Greene and the art club had missed the deadline for the official Empty Bowls organization, so they pivoted. The club would hold its own food drive and sell the bowls to support the church's effort.

The food drive kicked off with scholars creating their own Andy Warhol-inspired 3-D paper soup cans. The cans first became posters, hung around school to announce the drive and list what items to bring, and then became a display piece near the food drop-off bin. The Rosenow's (St. Marcus staff members) helped produce a video during a Professional Development day to spread the word even further.

Scholars from K4 through 4th grade collected over 300 pounds of food.

When the North Avenue Campus Middle School heard what the art club was doing, they decided to join in. Every year, the middle school raises money for an organization, and this time they chose to back the art club's effort. Under Micah Ricke's leadership, the middle school raised close to \$4,000, which, combined with the \$400 the art club earned from selling bowls at a church Lenten service dinner, totaled \$4,400.

The Lenten dinner gave Greene a chance to teach her scholars something new: how to sell what they'd made. Before the event, the club talked through what to say to church members as they approached the table. Greene stepped back and watched as scholars took the lead, talking about their work and making the case for each bowl.

"It was fun to step back and see the scholars take leadership and pride in their creations," Greene said.



Greene took the club's president, Rylee, and vice president, Aylen, to deliver the check and donated food to Nourish MKE at the Cherry Street campus. They were joined by Lasae Simpson, NAC's 7th-8th Grade Dean of Culture & Behavior, and several middle school leaders, who helped deliver the donation and saw firsthand the impact of their support. On the way, they got a little turned around. Stopped at a red light, Greene noticed a homeless man standing nearby. She rolled down her window and handed him several packets of ramen from a bin on the passenger seat. He told her it would be enough to feed him for the whole week and thanked the kids in the back seat.

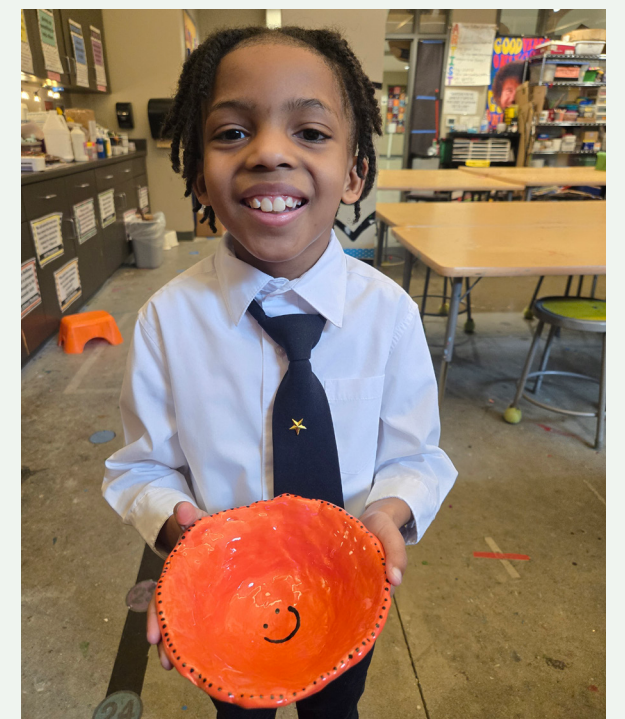
"It was one of those moments where the kids could actually see their hard work directly impact those we were trying to support," Greene said. "It was also amazing to see God's hand in it all."

The actual drop-off was quick and low-key. But as Ricke told Greene later, that was its own lesson. Sometimes as Christians, you don't do good deeds to get recognized. You serve humbly.

For Greene, the impact on her scholars went well beyond the fundraising totals. She saw students develop a stronger sense of responsibility and empathy through the project. In art club, scholars talked about the pride they felt in being able to help others.

"This experience encouraged them to think beyond themselves and recognize the impact they can have through service and compassion," she said.

St. Marcus will continue its NEAHS chapter next year, inducting new members and looking for more ways to put creativity to work for the community around them.



300+ lbs. of food
collected

How Three-Year-Olds at St. Marcus Outgrow the Benchmarks

Every great story has an origin. For hundreds of St. Marcus scholars, that origin is K3.

Walk into a K3 classroom and you'll find three-year-olds learning letter names and sounds, practicing how to hold a pencil, counting to 20, and cutting with scissors.

You'll also find them praying, singing hymns, and hearing Bible stories that teach them who they are: children of God.

Each scholar receives a beginner Bible at the start of the year, and reading a story from it with their family is a weekly assignment. Chapel happens every week. Faith runs through everything here.

"We know what children are capable of and teach to that high standard," said Rachel Guenther (right), K3 Program Director, who has spent 17 years in early childhood education and 15 of them at St. Marcus. **"That's what sets St. Marcus apart from other preschools."**

The academic bar matches the spiritual one.

K3 uses the Frog Street curriculum and conducts quarterly assessments across multiple developmental domains, from early literacy to fine motor skills. Teachers review progress as a team, build plans to support each scholar,

and share results with families. The program also teaches scholars about brain states through Conscious Discipline, equipping even the youngest learners with tools to manage their emotions: breathing techniques, a cool-down area, and the language to talk about how they feel.



"Many of our scholars come to K3 not knowing how to identify any letters or knowing any sounds, not knowing how to hold a pencil," Guenther said. "They leave K3, many knowing all letter names and sounds, able to count to 20, hold a pencil correctly, and write their first and last names."

The data from Lead Teacher Krystal Glosson's (left) classroom this year puts that in numbers. In math, 68.6% of her students were at grade level in the fall, with 31.4% above. By spring, just 7.1% were at grade level because 88.1% had surged above it. In language and literacy, 62.7% were above grade level in the fall, climbing to 85.7% by the

third quarter. Glosson saw the most academic growth of any K3 teacher this year. A 25-year veteran of early childhood education who has spent 12 of those years as a lead teacher at St. Marcus, she just earned her Bachelor of Science in Early Childhood Education from Concordia University. She did it while teaching full-time and achieving some of the program's strongest classroom results.



Results like that don't happen without an equally talented and deeply experienced team. **The K3 staff is nine educators deep with a combined 129 years in early childhood education and 97 years at St. Marcus.** Lead teachers like Faye Kemp (31 years in early childhood) and Connie Harps (27 years) have been anchoring the program for over a decade each. Support Teacher Fathia Kemp alone has 47 years in the field. That kind of stability means families see the same trusted faces year after year.



Two of those faces carry a particular significance. Support Teachers Nigeria Bullox and Autumn Johnson are both St. Marcus alumni who attended as scholars and came back to serve the next generation. "The fact that we have two alumni on the K3 team speaks to our deep mission of discipling children for Christ now and for all eternity and training them in excellence," Guenther said. "Many of our scholars love their experience at St. Marcus, and some return to be teachers for future generations."

That kind of full-circle story plays out in the families, too.

Peyden (left) started in K3 and is now a 7th grader. His mom, Anamaria, said the school's reputation and Christ-centered focus drew her family in. "I wanted Peyden to learn about our God at an early age and start creating his personal relationship with God," she said. "K3 set the foundation for him to easily transition into higher grade levels." What stands out most to her now is his social and emotional growth: the leadership skills, the friendships, the way he communicates with the people around him. Peyden remembers his K3 teacher, Ms. Harps, as someone who "was nice and cared about us a lot." He remembers field trips, books, and most of all, learning about God. Now heading into 8th grade, he was selected for the Discover America travel experience this year and wants to be an attorney, an engineer, or a professional football player.

Nyree (right), now in 5th grade, is another K3 graduate whose family chose St. Marcus for its curriculum and culture. Her mom, Shelley, said the school's progressive approach to learning and strong communication with families have kept them invested year after year. "We have enjoyed watching Nyree develop as a young scholar and hold her Christian values high," she said. Nyree still remembers the classroom where it all started. "One of my favorite memories is when Ms. Glosson taught me how to form letters using wooden shapes," she said. "She made learning fun and helped me become a better student." Today, she's looking forward to the 5th-grade Discover America experience and wants to be a science teacher and a storm chaser when she grows up.

The feedback from families and K4 teachers tells the same story over and over: scholars who attend K3 at St. Marcus arrive at the next level ready, with a stronger foundation than peers who start at K4 from somewhere else.

The impact of K3 is also shaping St. Marcus' vision. Currently serving 70 three-year-olds, the school plans to double that through an early childhood expansion in the future. Providing even more children with the opportunity to build the academic, social-emotional, and spiritual foundation for long-term success.



For Guenther and her team, that is the whole point. K3 is where three-year-olds learn their letters, math, learn to pray, and discover they are capable of more than anyone might expect.



Building Up the Men Behind Our Scholars

St. Marcus is growing its investment in the men who show up for our scholars.

Men That Matter is one of several family empowerment efforts at St. Marcus designed to strengthen the people and relationships that surround our scholars.

All events are designed to give fathers, grandfathers, uncles, brothers, and mentors a reason to walk through the door, stay connected, and deepen relationships with each other and their scholars.

The focus on men is specific and purposeful.



Many of the men in our scholars' lives want to be involved but don't always see a clear entry point. Jason and Ron are building that entry point, meeting men where they are, grounding each gathering in God's Word and personal testimony, and creating the kind of brotherhood that keeps men coming back.

As Men That Matter continues to grow, so will the ways St. Marcus walks alongside the men raising our scholars.

MEN THAT MATTER

Led by Jason Alston, Father and Men's Ministry Coordinator, and Ron Kelly, Family Minister and Pastor-in-Training, the ministry has spent the past year creating consistent touchpoints for the men in our scholars' lives.

That has looked like breakfasts, devotions, and activities with their scholars at each campus, open gyms, free haircut events, and community service projects.





BEYOND

St. Marcus School Gala

November 14, 2026

Beyond begins here.

Join us as we celebrate the immeasurable impact of investing in children, families, and futures that will reach far beyond these walls.

Reserve your seat now and see sponsorship opportunities at stmarcusgala.com



More Than a Car Company, More Than a Sponsorship

Wally & Deb Sommer Are Helping St. Marcus Build Futures from the Ground Up

When Wally Sommer attended an education event in Milwaukee years ago, he expected an informative evening. What he got was a wake-up call. Speakers laid out the sobering trend lines of urban education in the city: declining public school enrollment, persistent achievement gaps, and solutions that, as Wally put it, "just weren't making a difference." Then Henry Tyson took the stage. "I remember hearing him speak and thinking, this is a bigger deal than I really imagined it," Wally said. "And the community is actually interested in doing something about this."

That evening became a turning point. Wally and his wife, Deb, had both grown up in Mequon-Thiensville, where they met in high school and experienced firsthand what a strong education looks like. The contrast with Milwaukee's urban schools moved them to act.

Wally's connection to St. Marcus through his WELS congregation and Deb's deep roots in faith-based education made the fit feel natural. In St. Marcus, they found a mission that matched what they already believed.

Their generosity didn't come out of nowhere. Both were raised by parents who modeled community involvement. Wally's father, a small business owner, was deeply active in Rotary. The Sommer kids grew up helping with the annual fundraiser, watching how giving brought people closer together.

"The community has just been so good to us that it's very easy to be good back to the community," Deb said.

That spirit has carried forward to the next generation. Today, Wally and Deb's son Grant runs Sommer's Automotive, the family's Subaru dealership, and community involvement remains part of the culture there. Grant and his wife, Laura, share the same commitment to giving back and know the mission of St. Marcus well.



Under Grant's leadership, the dealership's partnership with St. Marcus has continued to grow.

Subaru's national motto, "More Than a Car Company," plays out locally through programs like Share the Love and a partnership with AdoptAClassroom.org. For the Sommer family, there was only one school that made sense for that classroom program: St. Marcus.

Through AdoptAClassroom.org, new teachers at the growing Karl J. Schlueter campus receive spending accounts for essential classroom supplies.

For five years running, this partnership has given a tangible boost to educators arriving at a campus that adds new classrooms every year. Teachers have described the experience as transformative. For many, it was the first time they had the resources to set up their rooms the way their students needed.

"We would naturally only think of St. Marcus for this because of the situation and the need for it there, and the way that we know it's going to be used," Wally said. "It's going to be used fully and enthusiastically."

As longtime gala sponsors and members of the St. Marcus Leadership Council, the Sommers have watched the school evolve up close. Wally describes the campus expansion as "amazing," especially given the challenges the school has worked through. What strikes him most is how the core mission has held steady through all of it: the focus on Christianity, on learning, on getting better every year. He sees the big milestones, like groundbreakings and grand openings.

The program aims to double the three-year-old program to ensure that 90% of students are on track in reading by the end of Kindergarten. The data is clear: scholars who start at St. Marcus as early as age three and grow up in the school's culture perform significantly better over time. Getting families in the door early and walking alongside parents from the very beginning gives children the strongest possible foundation.

For Wally, supporting the initiative was straightforward. He sees the connection between early literacy and everything else St. Marcus is building.

The initiative also strengthens the parent partnership by incorporating monthly teacher-parent check-ins to support reading at home.

"You can't distinguish between how important it is to hear the stats and to see the testimonials," Wally said. "One is not more important than the other, but the two definitely work hand in hand."

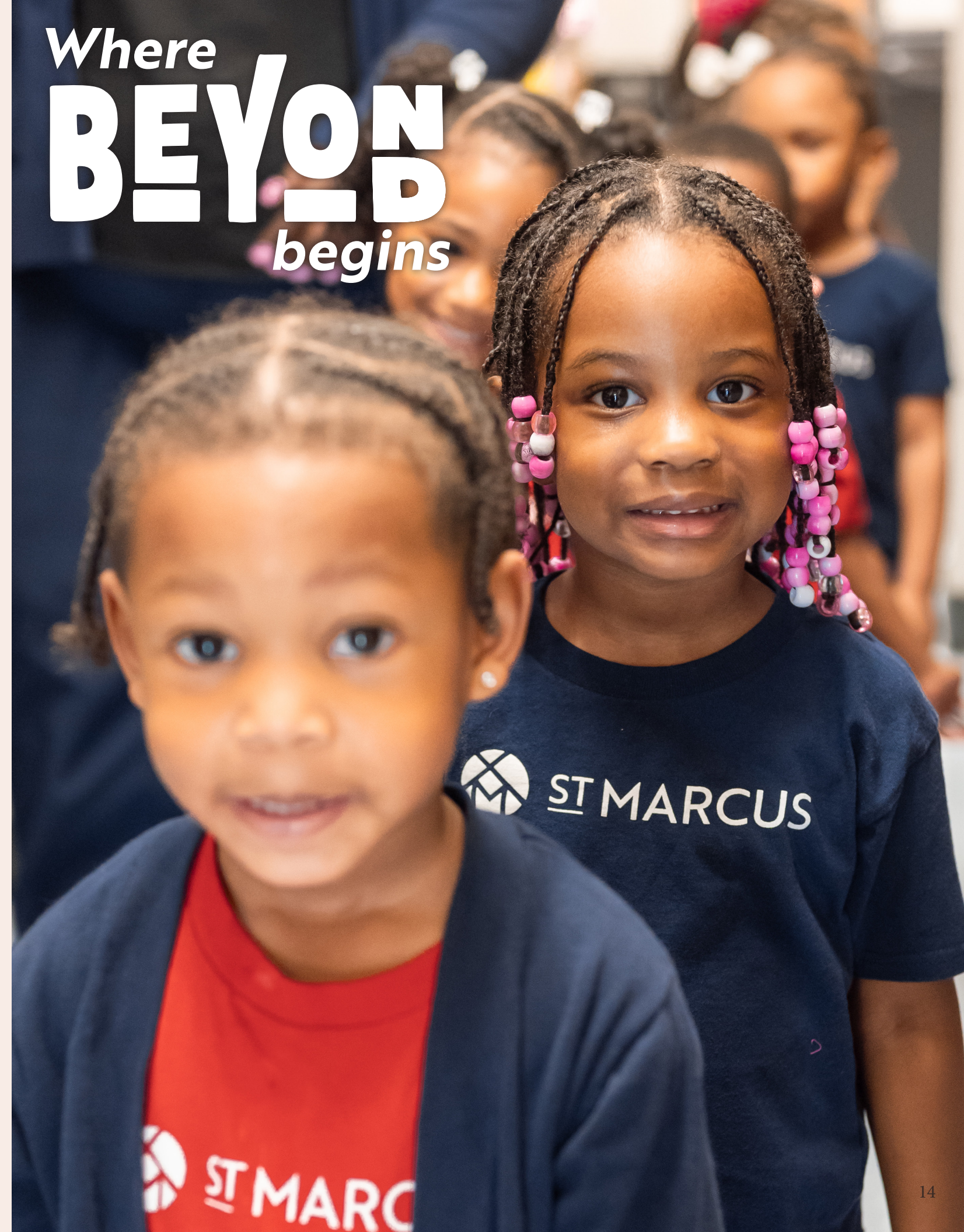


He also sees the quieter ones, like walking through a hallway full of scholars on an ordinary school day. "The small moments as well as the big moments," Wally said. "That's what makes it real."

That long view is also what drew Wally and Deb to become among the earliest supporters of St. Marcus's Early Childhood Literacy Initiative.

Outside of their work with St. Marcus, the Sommers enjoy traveling and spending time with their five grandchildren. Deb is a painter who has worked in watercolors for over thirty years and now explores acrylics and oils from her studio in Thiensville. It's a full life, shaped by the same values they bring to everything they do: faith, family, and a deep belief that **investing in a child's future is always worth it.**

Where BEYOND begins





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St. Marcus is a Christian, high-expectations choice school serving students from grades K3 to 8th.

Using a proven urban education model, St. Marcus seeks to instigate change and provide a community of learning where children and families live, grow, and thrive.

St. Marcus' driving vision is that every family has access to excellent education in the city of Milwaukee.



STMARCUS.ORG/SCHOOL

