

Cornerstone gets ready to graduate its first class

Thursday, May 24, 2007 11:29 PM CDT

By Phyllis Coulter

pcoulter@pantagraph.com



Cornerstone Christian Academy class of 2007.

From left: Chris Wong, YaeRa Oh, Megan Belgrave, Allison Clark, Jerad Romine, Aaron Gregory, Austin Brucker, Blake Swiggum, Travis Wilson

BLOOMINGTON -- A persistent third-grader's action almost a decade ago helped lead to Cornerstone Christian Academy's first high school graduation this year.

Travis Wilson of Normal wanted to go to the school his sister would attend in 1998. But what was then a preschool was being expanded into a school for up to third grade. Travis would be entering fourth.

He did the only thing he could do.

He approached Becky Shames, the school administrator. "I tugged on her sleeve and asked her if the school could be for fourth-graders, too," he recalls.

His wish was granted.

Wilson was among 80 children in preschool through fourth grade when Cornerstone Christian Academy opened in August 1998 at Grace United Methodist Church in Bloomington.

The school grew along with Wilson and his classmates. On June 2, he and eight other seniors will become the academy's first high school graduates. Three of them started with him.

These students made sacrifices, and they always were the trailblazers. "In many ways, they set the culture for the school," said Beth Sondgeroth, academic dean at the school.

They were the first middle school graduates, the ones to start sports and the guinea pigs to test new curriculum.

Another request by Wilson led to the school's first foray into sports. He became the only member of the junior high's new cross country team.

He missed making state finals by two-tenths of a second that first year, and he intends to continue his sport in the fall at Trinity Christian College in Palos Heights.

The school has grown tenfold in a decade, from 45 students as a preschool in 1997 at Eastview Christian Church to 450 students today at its modern, \$4.7 million location on Ireland Grove Road in Bloomington that opened in 2003.

Wilson's class had as many as 17 students in eighth grade, but some moved or chose to attend larger, more-established high schools, Sondgeroth said.

"This group has been very loyal," Shames said. "They wanted to be part of what God is doing."

The atmosphere and the small class sizes were among the things students said they enjoyed most.

While the soon-to-be graduates praised the small class sizes, they say they are ready to tackle supersized college classes.

"Sit up front, pay attention and go to class," said Jerad Romine, 18, of Normal, relaying the advice he received from his teachers about succeeding in college. "The teachers (here) definitely love you and care about you," he said.

Valedictorian Allison Clark, 18, of Bloomington, who plans to attend the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, is prepared to be one of hundreds in a classroom. She was one of two in her Spanish class this year.

Cornerstone managed to offer a number of course choices one might not expect at a small school, such as classes in technology, journalism and biblical Greek.

The students said they didn't feel they missed out on anything. Not having enough students to field a baseball or football team wasn't a problem, said Romine, who played basketball.

"If I went to public school, I might not have made the team," said Romine, who played all four years.

"They all had to play — there are only five boys in the class," Sondgeroth said.

The team didn't win many games at first, but they won some, competing against small Christian schools at first and with larger schools in the Illinois High School Association this past season.

Sondergroth said these students are the ones who were brave enough to be first. "I think God handpicked them by design," she said.

The vision of growth for the high school, which now has 50 students, continues.

Cornerstone hopes to build a \$3.5 million, 26,000-square-foot high school addition. It would include classrooms, science labs, administration offices and a large open meeting area that would double as lunchroom and chapel, said April Kinzinger, director of development.

As for the future of the graduates, all plan to go to college. Describing themselves as family, they said they plan to keep in touch. Most said they will remain in the Midwest, and two even plan to be college roommates.

Sondergroth said she will miss them.

"It's hard to imagine the school here without them," she said. "I hope and pray we've prepared them well for what lies ahead."

By the numbers

- 9 The number of graduating Cornerstone seniors; five more are enrolled in the class of 2008, followed by 21 for 2009.
- 27 The number of classrooms at the new Cornerstone school when it opened in 2003.
- 17 The number of new classrooms planned for the future 26,000-square-foot high school addition.
- 45 The number of students when the school opened in 1997; today's total is 450.
- 50 The number of high school students currently attending the school.
- 100 The number of people already registered to attend the first graduation.

Copyright © 2007, Pantagraph Publishing Co. All rights reserved.