

Summer Learning is fun

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Milwaukee Summer Learning is in full swing at Rising Stars, a tutoring program in Milwaukee, an affiliated ministry of the School Sisters of Notre Dame (SSND). Rising Stars' mission is to strengthen reading and math skills of at-risk students in areas of urgent need in Milwaukee and surrounding areas. “We collaborate with our community and local schools to ensure that no child is excluded from the benefit of educational support; and we commit to making a life-long impact in the lives of children by giving them the building blocks they require to succeed in contributing to our future,” said Laura Harvancik, Executive Director of Rising Stars and SSND associate. “The foundress of the School Sisters of Notre Dame, Blessed Theresa of Jesus Gerhardinger, once said, ‘Follow the star rising in you; it will certainly lead you to Jesus.’ In her spirit, we educate with the desire that students grasp the star rising within them, the light which beckons them to achieve their greatest potential.”



Sister Barbara Janda with two students at Rising Stars

“This summer, we have developed a unique program specifically for one of the schools we partner with during the school year. This summer program features individualized lessons for each student, which is magical,” said Laura. “We had a one-on-one daily meeting for two weeks in June and another two weeks in July to ensure needs are being met for each child. Summer Learning with the sisters is fun!”

Sister Martha Waligora, Director of Academic Affairs for Rising Stars shares, “We partnered with the teachers at St. Agnes Butler school and designed the Summer Learning curriculum based upon the student’s state testing results. Specific materials were researched and strategically organized to guide our tutors in meeting each student’s needs and to strengthen their skills. Hard work, fun games, and yes popsicles all make it work.”

What makes this summer program even more unique is that students are learning with sisters at Trinity Woods, the primary residence of SSND in Milwaukee. Located on the Mount Mary University campus, Trinity Woods is committed to intergenerational living and learning.



Sister Suzanne Moynihan using a game as an educational tool

Suzanne Moynihan, Barbara Janda, Rita Krusell, Marie Andre Miszewski, Arlene Simon, Marie Vianney Bilgrien, Lourdes Pangelinan, Karen Walther, Mary Alyce Lach, Sylvia Hecht and Lauretta Rose Koscielniak. They joined numerous lay volunteers tutoring this summer. In addition to tutoring, sisters like Sister Gabriel Rooding, a centenarian who taught at St. Agnes Butler in Milwaukee, and Sister Margaret Mary Dohms, offer daily prayer and love to keep up on all the things the students are doing. Sister Sylvia Hecht, a long-term Rising Stars tutor said, “These children bless me even when I do not realize it.”

Rising Stars tutors reflect the cultural and spiritual values of the SSND, who are focused on transforming the world through education, with a special emphasis on women, young people and those who are poor.

From that one Catholic school, Rising Stars tutors now support students from K4 through eighth grade and serve a variety of designated schools throughout the city of Milwaukee and surrounding areas. Tutors strengthen the core subjects of reading and math, bridging a gap where success should be and improving children’s chances of not falling further behind or out of the school system all together.

Rising Stars volunteer tutors are women and men, ranging in age from 18-85+, who come from all walks of life and experiences. They volunteer in elementary schools, public schools, Catholic primary and middle schools, English as a second language programs and reading programs. During the pandemic, when all our schools closed, and when online education was required, Rising Stars helped ensure learning wasn’t disrupted. I can’t say or even write the words to help anyone understand the feeling and the life that Rising Stars, these sisters, lay tutors and students are bringing to us all,” said Laura. “One student’s mother expressed to me in gratitude, ‘I could just feel it when I walked in.’ When I outlined the plan to her son, another mom shared, ‘I was hoping he would get a sister.’”



A tutor working with a student using flashcards