

Hope Hall helps kids who learn differently

A few weeks ago, I saw a Facebook photo on a friend's page that caught my eye. It was of a young man in a school uniform and he was placing a piece of paper in a freshly dug hole. The caption read: "The I Can't Ceremony is a Hope Hall tradition that sends a strong message to our students that they can achieve anything that they put their minds to. On the first day of every school year, students 'bury' their fears by writing them on a piece of paper and we plant it in our courtyard."

What an amazing concept and perfect way to begin the school year, I thought. Then, I wondered where this school was located. Is it in Europe? California? Nope.

Hope Hall, founded in 1994, is an educational gem and it is located right in our own backyard in Gates.

This extraordinary private school is reserved for children who learn best in unique, multi-sensory ways. "It is not for the intellectually impaired or those with behavioral problems," said Sister Diana Dolce, founder, executive director and principal of Hope Hall. "It is very often not even for those qualified as learning-disabled."

The students who go to Hope Hall usually have auditory processing and speech/language issues, are about two years behind their peers in social/emotional development and have aptitude test scores too high for special education programs, but too low to succeed in mainstream public school classrooms.

Many enter Hope Hall, which is non-denominational, with low self-esteem and poor self-image as a learner due to repeated lack of success (despite their best efforts) in school and on state tests.

"I say to the parents, 'These kids are my African violets,'" said Dolce, a religious sister with the Sisters of St. Joseph, as she took me on a tour of the remarkable school, starting with her greenery filled office.

Unlike the cactuses in her office, which require little care to thrive, the African violets need specialized attention.

"I water my cactus once a month because that's what they need. I water my African violets Monday, Wednesday and Friday with lukewarm water because that's what they need," Dolce said. "At Hope Hall, we specialize in African Violets."

Children from every school district in Monroe County currently attend Hope Hall, which has a 100 percent graduation rate. The school, which does not follow the state's Common Core curriculum, prepares students to enter a two year college, but many then transfer to a four year school.

"When our students leave, they know how to study and they know how to advocate for themselves," Dolce said.

A key part of that advocacy comes from Dolce's example. She founded the school because she saw children "falling through the cracks." There were naysayers who told her it would be financially impossible, but she believed she could.

"I saw an unmet need so I gathered a small group of women — sisters, moms, business women, and school administrators — asked them to come to one meeting in 1993," said Dolce, recalling the roots of Hope Hall.

"I asked them two questions: Should we open an alternative school for educationally at risk kids? And would they be willing to be on a steering committee? They all said yes to both."

Seventy people gave the committee \$1,000 each for seed money, which was used to rent the building that is now the beautiful, bright and vibrant Hope Hall. Between January 1993 and September 1994, 300 three hundred volunteers spent 3,000 hours painting and cleaning the building, which was formerly a Christian school, and a school for the Gates Chili School District.

When the school opened, it had 43 kids in third through eighth grades three to eight and no custodians. Dolce shoveled snow and mopped the floors.

Hope Hall now has 173 students in second through 12th grades and the building does indeed have custodians. There is one maintenance task Dolce still prefers to do herself, though: She waters her violets.

To learn more about Hope Hall, 1612 Buffalo Road, Gates, go to hopehall.org, call (585) 426-0210 or search for Hope Hall School on Facebook.

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Hope Hall founder, director and principal Sister Diana Dolce, S.S.J., visits with students Christopher Jackson, left, and Mike Kosciwicz in the school's wood shop.

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