

From Humble Beginnings, Stillwater Christian Grows Into Vibrant Private Institution

Thirty-five years later, one of the largest Christian schools in the state continues to grow with its latest building expansion

BY DILLON TABISH // APR 28, 2015 //
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Cinda Wilson remembers teaching elementary classes in the Demersville school, a cramped building that resembled its historic roots. It was one of three sites where students at Flathead County Christian School would study in the early days, along with the Central Bible Church and a facility in Evergreen.

Today, 35 years after being founded, what is now Stillwater Christian School is thriving — and expanding — as a private education institution for students in kindergarten through high school.

The Kalispell school remains the valley's lone K-12 Christian institution for families seeking an education that incorporates the Bible and teachings of Jesus into the everyday curriculum.

"I'm a believer in Christ and that's the school's standpoint and it feels really good to be able to teach the way I believe," Wilson, a longtime high school English teacher, said.

The high school has over 100 students while the elementary and junior high enrollments approach nearly 200. Enrollment has dipped slightly in recent years, but administrators are hopeful that upcoming changes will lead to more growth.

This year signifies a notable anniversary for the school, which has developed from humble beginnings into one of the largest private Christian schools in the state.

But it also marks a time of significant expansion.

In early March, administrators announced plans to build nearly 11,000 square feet of new space onto the existing building to address space needs and help the school grow its programs into the future. The \$1.8 million expansion broke ground a month ago and crews expect to complete the development by August. It will be the largest expansion



since new high school classrooms and the gymnasium were added onto the current facility in 1996.

“It’s been really exciting to see the facilities just keep getting better and better,” Jim Venman, a high school English and history teacher, said. “It’s just tremendous to see the growth and the commitment from people willing to give and make this a priority.”

Roughly \$1.1 million of the project was gathered through fundraising, including the school’s prominent annual event that brings well-known speakers to the valley. This spring Mike Huckabee headlined the event, called “For Such a Time as This.” Previous speakers have included Ben Carson, a noted author and retired neurosurgeon who is considering running for president in the Republican primary, and NFL quarterback Tim Tebow.

Daniel Makowski, the school’s superintendent, said the event has helped raise funds for the school while also sharing a unique experience with local residents.

“I think it is an opportunity for us to be part of the community,” he said.

The original Flathead Valley Christian School opened its doors Aug. 28, 1980. There were 57 students in kindergarten through sixth grades. Eight teachers led courses in the church gymnasium at Evergreen Christian and Missionary Alliance. The school slowly grew and within a few years the school needed more space, which is when it split into three sites, including the former Demersville school south of Kalispell, which is no longer standing.

In 1986, the school expanded with a high school and the following year the first three graduates received diplomas.

In 1992, the school raised enough funds to purchase the former County Nursing Home on FFA Drive. The facility was renovated into a school and the current campus was unveiled in the 1992-93 academic term. Three years later, new high school classrooms were built along with a gymnasium, which now hoists over 50 state championship banners of Stillwater’s standout basketball, volleyball and soccer teams.

In 2004, the school changed its name to Stillwater Christian to provide a more distinct identity. The original Colt mascot changed to the Cougars.

Now the latest change is underway, and Makowski hopes it ushers in further growth and excellence.

“There’s been quite a lot of change over the years,” the 19th-year superintendent said. “I think we have matured as a school with our academic programs and with our business operations. And I think we’re just a stronger school and deliver a better product today.”

Three key areas continue to grow and are a big driver in the school’s expansion. The school’s preschool classes are noticeably crowded. Also, the art and music programs are filled with students.

“We have some strong programs that are growing and that’s really what is behind the addition,” Makowski said.

Also, over the years the school has adapted to the modern educational standards and the goal of better preparing students for college, Makowski said.

For upper grades, the school incorporates the Harkness Teaching Method, which is a principled approach to learning that departs from the traditional classroom setting and emphasizes collaboration among students. The Harkness model forces students to sit in circles and engage each other in discussions instead of the traditional lecture-style setting.

One of the new spaces in the school will be devoted to this type of setting along with a new hall for formal presentations.

“I think one of the goals I was given from the board when I started was to step up the academic rigor and the expectations of the students and the overall school discipline,” Makowski said. “And I think we’ve done that. Now it’s just a matter of keeping track of best practices and making sure we’re staying current.”

He added, “It’s not uncommon for kids to come back and say I was way ahead. I think they’re well prepared (for college).”

While other private schools are accredited through the state’s Office of Public Instruction, such as Missoula Loyola and Valley Christian in Missoula, Stillwater is not. Makowski said this is because the state oversight and regulations that Stillwater would have to follow would outweigh the benefits of being outside accredited. For example, under state accreditation Stillwater would have to eliminate one of its girls sports programs to meet Title IX rules.

“There are so many limitations when you get involved with the government. We’re just better off without it,” he said.

Stillwater is accredited through AdvancedEd, a nonprofit, non-governmental organization that accredits primary and secondary schools through the U.S.

“We have solid accreditations that validate our programs,” Makowski said.

Of course, another aspect that makes Stillwater unique is its ability to teach religion in its curriculum. Students take Bible study classes each year, learning the history of the Bible and its teachings.

“We look at literature through a Christian perspective,” Wilson said.

Venman follows a similar path with his history classes.

“We look at history as God’s history,” Venman said. “That makes us very unique.”