

OMNIUM RERUM
PRINCIPIA PARVA SUNT

THE BEGINNINGS
OF ALL THINGS
ARE SMALL.

By David Glaser

Geoff Revard still proudly displays the roster sheet from his first Saint Stephen's Latin Club in 2004. There are 15 names printed on the hand-written paper in colorful, purple and gold magic marker. *Omnium Rerum Principia Parva Sunt.*

Like a successful football coach who leaves a powerhouse program to help build a fledgling one, Revard came to SSES that year with big goals in mind and a plan to reach them.

While you may not commonly associate the study of Latin with the pursuit of championship trophies, there is a highly competitive side, culminating statewide annually at the Florida Junior Classical League (FJCL). Revard came to Saint Stephen's from Leon High School in Tallahassee. When he started there, the Latin program already boasted three all-state titles. By the time he left, they had collected seven more.

"I understood what it took. I also knew it would be a different kind of challenge here. I left a school where there were typically around 300 Latin students for one with maybe 100," Revard said. "But I'd seen Saint Stephen's students before at state and I knew they were bright kids – few but fierce is what (former Latin teacher) Linda Mishkin used to say."

Building a competitive program starts in the classroom, where Revard and Middle School Latin teacher Tony Haakman stoke their students' passion for the challenging translation of the Romance language, Roman culture, history, and art. The extracurricular Latin clubs then give motivated students an opportunity for a deeper dive in areas that spike their interest.

Proponents of Latin education bristle at the idea that there is nothing to be gained from studying a so-called "dead" language. For Revard, there is little difference in the discipline needed to learn Latin or a math concept such as algebra or geometry.

"In either case, it's about looking at something critically and developing critical thinking skills," he said. "Studying classics is much more about life than it is about conjugating. People haven't changed. We're still arguing about the same things today as they were then – government, personal responsibilities, the nature of divinity. It's just as relevant as ever."

All of those concepts are in play when it comes time for the state forum, and the Saint Stephen's team has grown from its modest beginnings into a powerhouse. While the team is primarily self-selected by students who choose to come forward and compete, Revard and Haakman also cultivate members with positive encouragement. The growth was necessary in order to create a team capable of scoring enough points to be a state contender. According to Revard, that means fielding the maximum allowed of 25 per team. Early on, SSES scraped together students from the Middle and Upper schools to reach that number. In April, the Falcons were able to field two complete teams by sending 42 participants to the 2019 competition.

At FJCL, students sit for traditional, multiple-choice exams that test their knowledge of language, history and mythology. They can also compete in artistic areas, costuming, music, oration and dramatic presentation, athletics, and the Jeopardy-style quiz known as Certamen. Teams are divided into junior and senior levels, and much like Revard's high school-level team, Haakman has seen fantastic growth with the junior team.

"When I started my very first Latin Club in the middle school, two students showed up," he said. "Now there are 25-plus and I took 16 to state this year. Geoff and I display the past trophies in our classrooms and they're not there to brag, they're there to show the kids: 'Here's the legacy and you can be a part of it.' I understand that not every student is going to love Latin, but it's my job as a teacher to help them find a passion. Honestly, it's a little selfish on my part, too, because I love to learn and every year I learn something new from them."



One of those students who provided extra motivation for both Haakman and Revard during his time at Saint Stephen's was Matthew Thomas. The Yale-bound senior was introduced to Latin competition as a seventh grader and it helped fire a passion that led him to become one of the state's top Latin students and president of the FJCL. Thomas just completed a Latin-based Capstone project under Revard's mentorship.

"I'm fortunate to be entering college with a plan to major in Classics. It's a genuine academic interest that I wouldn't have had if I hadn't been exposed to it here at Saint Stephen's," Thomas said. "Mr. Haakman introduced me to Certamen and inspired in me a passion for grammar. Mr. Revard is devoted to his students and was an amazing mentor for me. It's not a stretch to say that our faculty is among the best in the nation."

The results speak volumes. Over the past 15 years, Saint Stephen's has never finished outside the top 10 in the state at the senior level, and the 2019 team brought home the school's first-ever academic championship. There are many other highlights. In 2015, three Saint Stephen's students qualified to be part of the six-member Team Florida that ultimately won the Advanced Certamen National Championship in San Antonio, Texas. For eight straight years, a Saint Stephen's student has been elected to the JCL board at the state level.

"When you have kids that buy in, you know you're going to be good and we've gotten to the point now where the older, more experienced students are excited and willing to mentor the younger ones. If they believe they can win, you can make things happen," Revard said. "It's amazing what they accomplish. It's humbling and really gratifying that we can help them get there."