Wall mural in Upper School science wing

WATER IS LIFE

Saint Stephen's will be the first American site when it hosts the international conference in 2020

By David Glaser

It would have been so simple to just hit the delete key and not think twice. Instead, a connection that started as an interesting but rather mundane email inquiry has now become an opportunity for Saint Stephen's to introduce itself to the world in new and exciting ways.

From June 22-28, 2020, Saint Stephen's will host students, educators, scientists, and researchers from more than 20 countries for an emerging international conference known as Water Is Life. Held biennially, the gathering focuses on bringing together high school students (ages 16-18) to create a deeper awareness of water security and sustainability issues.

Saint Stephen's path to hosting has been an unexpected and whirlwind journey that began with an email early in 2016 from a high school in The Netherlands to Dr. Jan Pullen. It set in motion a chain of events that will put SSES on a global stage at the start of the school's 50th anniversary year.

"It's pretty remarkable when you think about it," Science Department Chair Ann Marie Shields said. "I remember getting a call from Dr. Pullen regarding an email she received from Huib Schilling (Director of Global Activities at Maurick College in The Netherlands). They were preparing to host Water Is Life that summer and reached out to see if we were interested in presenting some of our student marine science research. The short timeframe made our participation impossible, but it certainly opened the door."

(L-R) Huib Schilling, Ann Marie Shields, New College biology professor Sandra Gilchrist, Jan Pullen, Elizabeth Moore, Maurick College's Huub van der Linden.

It's a door Schilling decided to walk through. He had learned about Saint Stephen's via word of mouth, and reached out with his offer after internet research showed the school's serious commitment to marine science education and the opening of the SSES Marine Science Center in February 2016. Even though Saint Stephen's was not able to accept Schilling's initial invitation, the school piqued his interest enough to schedule a stop at campus later in the year while on a Florida family vacation.

Schilling's visit eventually led to Saint Stephen's participation last year in a mini-boat exchange project connecting students at SSES with counterparts at Maurick. It also set the stage for the Water is Life Association to extend an offer for Saint Stephen's to be not just a registered participant at the conference, but its host in 2020.

"The mini-boat project was a pathway for us to get to know each other," Shields said. "Each step just continued to line up with our own goals to advance what we do in marine science, and being able to host the conference during the school's 50th anniversary just seems like it was meant to be."

"In my first contact with Dr. Pullen, and follow-up with Mrs. Shields, I found enthusiasm, motivation, open-mindedness, and no hesitation to talk with international partners. There is also a common agreement about the importance of educating our young generation to bring more awareness about water issues in projects and study programs, and to learn from each other in a broad international setting," Schilling said. "The Water is Life initiative and Saint Stephen's Episcopal School was just one of those rare occasions where there was a common mindset from the first minute of the first conversations."

Through keynote addresses, dialogue sessions, and student presentations on water management strategies and challenges around the world, the conference plants the seeds of friendship, creates awareness on a variety of water issues, and develops scientific, diplomatic and leadership skills in its young participants.

Student teams present research regarding a water issue relevant to their local area. The different research categories (Technology & Engineering, Biodiversity, Education, Communities, and Leadership, Politics and Economics) give direction, but a multi-

disciplined approach is stimulated in each research project to broaden awareness and give more dimension and scope. Being tied to a conference cycle means that students can update participants about the latest developments in their research at the next conference, and transfer data and research results to future teams. The publication of an official research report is also part of the conference.

Each gathering is managed initially by the Water is Life Association, a cooperation between Raffles Institution in Singapore and Maurick College. The Saint Stephen's-based conference will be the first in the U.S. The inaugural Water is Life conference was held in Singapore in 2014. Other host sites have included The Netherlands (2016) and Japan (June 2018), where graduating senior Merry Moore will help break the ice for Saint Stephen's by presenting her coral reef research project. Future events are being considered for Australia and South Africa.

Schools participate by invitation only and more than 30 are currently on the roster, representing the U.S., Netherlands, Singapore, Australia, Japan, Germany, Zimbabwe, Brazil, Spain, Colombia, Denmark, Poland, Italy, Thailand, Canada, Austria, South Africa, France, Indonesia, and Iceland. The other American schools involved are Detroit Country Day and Manhattan College for Science and Mathematics. As the host institution, SSSES is able to invite other local schools to attend.

Saint Stephen's has also invited New College of Florida to partner in the 2020 conference. Some presentations will take place on the New College campus, and approximately 150 participants will be housed in the school's dormitories during their stay.

In addition to providing opportunities to present, the conference will offer Saint Stephen's students the chance to serve as ambassadors to approximately 30 teams of students from other parts of the world – helping to build friendships across the globe with people who share a common passion.

"I believe that if you get students excited and involved in this way in issues outside their local area, you give them a chance to provide leadership on global water issues. You empower them and foster stewardship of all things water," Shields said. "As a school, this will expand the scope of our program, enhance our mission, expand our research focus, and become a link in our global education program."