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SCHOOLS

Academic Spotlight: Lee Academy

School focuses on curriculum for gifted students

By **Deb Kelley** January 9, 2011

The senior class totals four students.

With such a small class, parents are invited to participate and are even welcomed on campus at this non-traditional private school in Tampa Bay.

Opened by Linda Lacey in 1983 and half hidden beneath a canopy of trees, Lee Academy for Gifted Education, located at 8613 Twin Lakes Boulevard, resembles a beautiful rustic summer camp. It's situated on acres of nature-like preserve.

Here, a wooden veranda overlooks a shimmering pond by the science lab inviting investigation by inquiring young minds. Largo, a friendly black Labrador and school mascot owned by the Social Studies teacher, freely roams the freshly mulched playground in search of scattering peacocks that also call Lee Academy home.

This non-institutional atmosphere promotes close relationships between all grade levels.

School Administrator Jennifer Deitz talked about the closeness of the students.

"We are more like a family than a school, and the children more like siblings than classmates," she said. "It's an extremely safe campus because of its size, and the fact that the teachers know all of the students and parents."

The graduating class of Eric Fink, 16, Olivia Harries, 17, Joseph Alford, 16 and Jerry Jones, 17, agree that what makes their school different besides the small size is the teacher availability.

"Because the classes are small, it makes it easier to learn, and you're not just a name. You can communicate with your teachers easily," says Alford, a student at Lee Academy for 11 years.

Fink, a student since seventh grade, agrees.

"It's actually a fun experience – being able to talk to your teacher in class," said Fink. "I know I didn't like writing or literature at all until I came to this school. The teachers are just really good at what they do."

As you open the doors of the main building and step into the foyer, there are immediate examples of the pride Lee Academy has in its exceptional students. While students' exhibits covering the walls display their artistic wares, multiple pegboards showcase poetry, photos of classroom events, and a call for submissions for yearbook and student magazine.

Instead of a sterile educational environment, this is what greets its intellectually-gifted pupils on a daily basis, ranging from early childhood education through high school.

What separates Lee Academy from other private schools is that it is specifically designed for the gifted learner. "

We have a small class size, therefore more individualized attention for the students, and have specialty teachers even for the early grades," says Dietz.

Here, ability and student need, not age, are the motivating factors in the child's education.

"Children feel safe to experiment and take a chance in their learning," Dietz said. "Our curriculum is designed to challenge. We encourage children to think creatively and outside-of-the-box and participate in as many hands-on activities as we can devise."

An average day for a Lee Academy student begins at 8:30 a.m., with a morning break and afternoon lunch shared with all grade levels, and concludes at 2:45 p.m. The year itself extends a bit past that of public school, is broken into mini vacations aside from the normal winter and spring break, following the British school system model.

"We are very interested in the whole child. Not just the academic, but social and emotional progress," says Dietz.

The educational environment at Lee Academy is much like a laboratory or workshop, rich in materials with simultaneous access to many learning activities. The emphasis is on experimentation, creativity and student involvement. Classes are as wide and varied as the student population itself and include Honors and Advanced classes in both Florida Sunshine State required daily core subjects and additional courses such as Art, Spanish, Latin, Computer Design, Physical Education, Yearbook, Magazine, Drama, among others.

In December, Lower School (middle school) and Upper School (high school) students showcase their individuality with In-Depth Study projects, a culmination of many months' worth of research, writing and assembling data on selected topics, preparing data boards and other visual media, as well as preparing speeches for visiting guests.

One annual highlight is the Winter Performance. Students in Early Childhood and Lower School perform original holiday skits for friends and family. Upper School students wear period costumes to perform a traditional British pantomime, a warped fairytale that usually has one or two male students wearing ladies' attire, much to the glee of the audience.

The school year concludes with the highly anticipated Night of the Arts, a student art showcase and Shakespeare performance by Upper School. In June, graduating seniors present their senior thesis projects.

At Lee Academy, students also volunteer in the community as a required part of their education experience.

Lee Academy offers a simple way for parents to learn if the school is a right fit for their child. The child becomes part of the school for three days, participating in lessons and different activities.

At the end of the evaluation, the school coordinator meets with the parents to determine if the fit is right. Open House scheduled for January 20, from 9 a.m. until 2 p.m., and allows parents to see Lee Academy during a regular school day.

The success of Lee Academy can be attributed to several reasons, but one in particular, Dietz says.

"Lee Academy has been successful for the past 28 years due to Linda Lacey and our teachers' commitment to gifted education," she said. "This, combined with our flexibility with our students, allows us to create an integrative curriculum and provide the best specialized education to be found anywhere in Tampa Bay."



PHOTOS (2)



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