



Grief: Living in a time of loss

St. Agnes students remember their friend Evan Hoffman

By **DIANE SCHLINDWEIN**
Staff writer

This year's eighth-graders at St. Agnes Catholic School in Springfield are dedicating their last year at the school in memory of a special classmate, Evan Hoffman.

Evan, who would have been an eighth-grader this year, passed away June 9 after a two-year battle with a rare form of cancer, rhabdomyosarcoma. The students and faculty at St. Agnes had remained involved with Evan in prayer and support throughout his illness, and now they want to honor his memory during this year's eighth-grade activities.

At the first school Mass late this summer, the entire school gathered to begin the academic year and remember Evan with love and gratitude. At Mass, children, faculty members and Evan's parents, Jeff and Myra Hoffman, heard these words, "We gather to remember today, with love and gratitude, our friend and student, Evan Hoffman, who now shares in the light of heaven. We are so grateful that Evan was a part of our school family and we celebrate the gift of light and love that Evan shared with all of us. God calls us in this new school year to let our own light shine, as Evan did. Evan's grateful heart and courageous spirit inspired us all and made a difference in the lives of so many people. We ask God's Spirit to help us work together this year to let our light shine and make a difference in God's world."

"So, the theme for this year is 'Let Your Light Shine,'" says Sister Joan Sorge, OP, principal of St. Agnes School. "Evan lived with courage, faith and steadfastness. We want to make a difference as Evan made a difference in our lives."

Following that Mass, Evan's parents, the faculty and students of St. Agnes gathered to plant a tree in Evan's memory. "There is a rock by the tree that bears Evan's name and says Class of 2011," Sister Joan explains.

"We also light the Paschal candle for all school liturgies as a sign of Evan's presence and life among us," Sister Joan says. Because the name Evan is a derivative of the name John, St. Agnes pastor, Father Robert Jallas added a plate to the side of an icon of John that features Evan's name and his life dates.

Evan passed away in the first weeks of summer vacation, but parents were notified and asked to help out by bringing food or supplies for Evan's memorial reception. Families of the students in Evan's grade were informed about more specific ways that they could help.

"All of the eighth-graders participated in the funeral Mass by acting as readers or by carrying a candle. One eighth-grade boy acted as a pallbearer," Sister Joan says. As a memorial to Evan, about 2,000 origami cranes made as reminders to pray for Evan during Catholic Schools Week were passed out to those who came to his services. Many of the children wrote letters to Evan.

Evan is remembered in the school, too. A large poster featuring Evan — who was known for his sense of humor — hangs in his memory in the cafeteria, along with the words from *Monty Python*: "Always look on the bright side of life." The student council is working on a permanent display in the school's hall that will honor him. Another permanent memorial to Ali Fischer, a fifth-grader

at St. Agnes who died in an accident in January 2002, is also in the hallway.

Because they are grateful for all the support provided by St. Agnes School, Evan's parents plan to memorialize him by dedicating Evan's Reading Corner in the school library. "It will have some new books there, but Evan's parents also want to donate some of Evan's books," Sister Joan says.

"The eighth-graders will have a class T-shirt designed and they want Evan remembered on that," she says. At graduation, their classmate will be awarded an honorary diploma and his parents will be invited to accept it.

As principal, Sister Joan says she had to seek God's grace in leading the school during a difficult time. At the end of the 2009-2010 school year, it was evident that cancer treatments were no longer working for Evan. It was then that Sister Joan called students together to speak to

them about Evan's prognosis. "We had been praying for a miracle. So I had to tell them that many times the miracle for which we have prayed is not what we expect," she said, saying the Holy Spirit helped guide her words. "I wanted them to know at that time, before summer vacation, that God might be calling Evan home and we need to know that and prepare for that."

"After the prayers, there was total silence, so I asked if any of the children wanted to say something about Evan," Sister Joan remembers. "Many children witnessed that day. But one boy said, 'I need to live my life now in the fullest way possible and I learned that from Evan.' It was a graced moment."

"As I explained to the kids, sometimes a person becomes a saint more quickly than others," Sister Joan says. "God was ready for Evan sooner than most."

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