

Fayetteville students start school day the healthy way

written by Special to Arkansas Catholic |



FAYETTEVILLE — Before they hit the books each day, students at St. Joseph School in Fayetteville are pounding the pavement. The students are members of the Panther Club, a walking/running club that's garnered the attention of The Hallmark Channel. The Panther Club was started by Shannon Shields, who teaches one of the school's two kindergarten classes.

"My background is physical education and health," Shields said. "While I'm the kindergarten teacher, (the Panther Club) is my way of contributing to the overall school environment." The Panther Club has become popular with many of the school's students. Membership is open to any student who wants to join (from grades kindergarten through seven) and who arrives at school early enough to participate. Students start running or walking laps around the parking lot and field adjacent to the school at 7:30 on mornings that the weather permits during the spring and fall, while Shields counts laps for each student. Shields painted a make-shift track on the field during the club's inaugural year and it conveniently worked out to be one-quarter of a mile. After awhile, the students didn't need any markers.

More than 100 students have participated in the Panther Club since its inception but on a daily basis, Shields estimates 30 to 40 take part.

"I've had some run two miles before school," Shields said.

"It's really good (as a pre-school activity)," she said, because students can enjoy the fresh air and visit with their friends. Those who don't choose to participate sit in the school cafeteria where no talking is allowed.

Each child participates at his or her own level, whether it's jogging, running or walking and some do a combination, Shields said.

The club has twice been featured in the local newspaper, *The Northwest Arkansas Times*, and the last time caught the eye of someone from The Hallmark Channel.

A television cameraman came to Fayetteville in early December. "It had rained a lot and the field was absolutely muddy," Shields said, "but the kids all came out."

The filming actually began at Shields' home because she exercises or works out first thing each morning, before going to school. "He got me on the treadmill and me and my daughter,

(Jasmine), heating a healthy breakfast.”

Although Shields has been told to expect the program to air soon, she hasn't been able to learn exactly what date it will be on.

As for the Panther Club, Shields said 72 students have reached the 10-mile mark, 15 have done 50 miles around the makeshift track and another 13 students are within 10 miles of making that goal. Two students have marked 100 miles on the track.

Besides the obvious benefits of physical fitness and fresh air, the students can earn prizes.

Club members earn a badge when they complete 10 miles as part of the club and there's a T-shirt at 15 miles. A \$25 gift certificate is awarded to students who make the 100-mile mark.

Various donors contribute so the gift certificate may differ from time to time. Wal-Mart was a recent sponsor, Shields said.

Shields is happy to be teaching at St. Joseph School. Originally from Berryville, she completed her master's degree at the University of Arkansas.

“I'm very blessed to be at such a wonderful school,” Shields continued. “I definitely like it.”