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# Inspired to Lead

by **BILL DONAHUE** | photography by **JODY ROBINSON**

Following a five-year campaign of remarkable transformation, the **Academy of Notre Dame de Namur** inspires today's young women to become the bold, compassionate leaders of tomorrow.

**S**ince 1856, young women have found inspiration at the Academy of Notre Dame de Namur—through its challenging academic program, through the teachers devoted to helping them become lifelong learners, and through the serenity of its 39-acre Villanova campus. Given the transformation the Academy has undergone in the past five years, Notre Dame believes it is better prepared than ever to help each student find the inspiration she needs to make her mark on the world.

Notre Dame, a college-preparatory school for young women in grades six through 12, recently completed a bold five-year period of enhancement and elevation, with clear and ambitious strategies designed to propel the Academy—and its students—forward. Its

strategic vision: to become the premier independent Catholic academy for young women in North America, by developing strong, confident women who are prepared to be leaders in a global society.

In the fall of 2014, Notre Dame initiated a collaborative and comprehensive process to reimagine the academic program, the faculty, and the physical campus, as well as the ways in which students interact with the outside world. Known as “Our Time to Inspire,” the 2015-2020 strategic vision provided a “wonderful opportunity to help students grow as women of leadership in the global community,” according to Head of School Judith A. Dwyer, Ph.D.

“Every educational institution has to build on its heritage,” Dr. Dwyer says. “We have always been quite competitive on every level, but we wanted to take our strengths, historically speaking, and bridge that opportunity into the 21st century. We have to always make sure we’re providing our students with the tools and competencies they need to be leaders in a global society.”

## Renewed and Refreshed

With the approval of the Academy’s Board of Trustees and the support of a fruitful fundraising campaign that netted more than \$30 million, the vision started to become reality in 2015. Some of the most visible examples of the campus-wide renewal included the construction of new athletic fields, the exterior restoration of Notre Dame’s iconic Mansion, and the

addition of a new dance studio, as well as the groundbreaking of a new building, the Riley Center for STEM Education.

While students and staff have marveled at the campus’s physical transformation over the past five years, some of the most notable changes involve Notre Dame’s robust academic program. Dr. Dwyer cites the creation of the Center for Global Leadership, designed to immerse students in other cultures through opportunities to connect with peers in countries around the globe.

Since the Center’s announcement in the spring of 2015, Notre Dame has established partnerships with eight sister schools around the world—in Argentina, Canada, China, England, Japan, Peru, Singapore, and Taiwan. Notre Dame has had to temporarily reshape the curriculum in light of the pandemic to focus less on in-person exchanges and more on virtual collaborations, such as bringing awareness to climate change and other pressing issues that affect the entire world.

“The opportunity to study and visit and come to know other cultures allows us to have a deeper appreciation of the solidarity of humanity,” says Dr. Dwyer, a Fulbright Scholar. “I truly do believe that these young women are the leaders that will bring fresh eyes and ideas to some of the challenges that we face as an international community. Having both an intellectual and experiential sense of our differences is critical to that mission.”

Notre Dame has also taken dramatic steps forward in the areas of science, technology,

engineering, and mathematics, known collectively as STEM. The Riley Center for STEM Education has given the school a 30,000-square-foot hub to bring the newly integrated STEM curriculum to life. The Center, which opened in April 2019, includes eight science laboratories, three lab prep rooms, eight mathematics classrooms, a design thinking and entrepreneurship classroom, and labs devoted to design and innovation, robotics, and coding.

“Women have traditionally been under-represented in STEM careers,” Dr. Dwyer says. “That’s why it’s so important for young women to have these opportunities in middle school and upper school, where they will develop the drive to take them through university and beyond. But if we look at the study of STEM itself, it’s important for all careers, not just careers in science and technology.”

Notre Dame has woven technology into its DNA. In fact, the Academy has been recognized as an Apple Distinguished School “for continuous innovation in learning, teaching, and the school environment.” A

exalting the human spirit,” Dr. Dwyer adds. “We’ve always had a strong tradition of the arts, because they play an indispensable role in education. Students need to see the beauty of artistic expression, whether it’s to mark an historic moment or to honor a moment of celebration or pain, through dance or theater or music or creative writing.”

### Expanding Horizons

Bridget Bonner, director of the middle school, has been part of the Notre Dame community for nearly 20 years. Having begun her career as a religion teacher, she has been amazed by the Academy’s transformation over the years, particularly the past five. She’s in equal awe of what has remained intact—namely, the sense of community, the dedi-



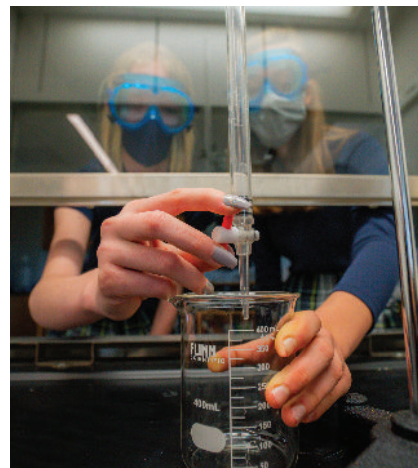
the sense of community, the dedi-

Liz Willis, Ph.D., joined Notre Dame less than a year ago as associate head of school. Previously she worked at Oakwood School in Los Angeles, first as the dean of students for the high school and a grade level coordinator, as well as teaching social studies, and then as the secondary school academic dean. She was drawn to Notre Dame because of its reputation for giving young women the tools they need to navigate the future successfully.

“When a girl graduates [from Notre Dame], she will know who she is and what she wants to achieve, she will know how she wants to marshal her talents and gifts to serve others, and she will seek to make a positive impact on the world,” says Dr. Willis. “She will also consider her life in the context of others, because everything we do here is rooted in relationships, and she will be



*From STEM disciplines to the arts, the Academy of Notre Dame de Namur aims to educate “the whole person.”*



## Academy of Notre Dame de Namur

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1:1 MacBook program has been especially helpful over the past year to support students through remote learning.

In terms of the curriculum, course electives in the upper and middle schools have expanded to include the likes of entrepreneurship and design thinking, as well as Mandarin as an extension of its world languages program. Likewise, Notre Dame places a distinct focus on the arts as part of the school’s devotion to educating “the whole person.”

“Students need to be educated across fields, harmoniously and simultaneously, and that includes the arts and the role they play in

cation to serving others, and a deep reverence for the Catholic faith, which serves as the Academy’s bedrock.

“We follow in the footsteps of the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur and Saint Julie [Billiard], teaching girls what they need to know for life,” she says. “The things that girls need to know may have changed, but what hasn’t changed is that we continue to teach them how to be compassionate leaders, how to exercise responsible freedom, how to have mature and intelligent conversations, and how to expand their horizons.”

Teachers and students spend a lot of time talking about life “beyond the gates,” according to Kim Burke, director of the upper school. Her goal: to make sure all students have the foundation and values needed to thrive once they leave Notre Dame.

“Our girls strive to be more, to do more,” she says. “We want our students to feel like they can step into whatever roles they step into once they leave here, whether it’s social justice, STEM, the humanities, or wherever life takes them.”

ambitious in terms of how she would want to impact the lives of others.”

Going forward, Notre Dame will continue to evolve and find new ways to inspire students to learn and to lead, both on campus and long after they have left the Academy’s hallowed grounds.

“‘Our Time to Inspire’ was an effort to enhance the mission and quality of life for all students, as well as our faculty and staff,” adds Dr. Dwyer. “Young women today need to have the ability to think and grow and dream of distant horizons. I always say the world needs great women, and I see great women among our student body and our alumnae.” ■