

## **Faculty and Staff Testimonials**

Star of the Sea Catholic School offers a dedicated and caring professional faculty and staff with all teachers certified by the Commonwealth of Virginia. Over the last 10 years, Star of the Sea Catholic School has secured over 40% of our faculty and staff, delivering a positive, familiar stability to students and families. Our faculty and staff undergo a performance appraisal completed by the Principal throughout the year, and all teachers maintain the Diocesan Religion Certification – Handing on the Faith – which requires 10 hours of faith formation annually.

Dr. Cathryn Whisman  
Principal

### **Mrs. Monique Lambertz, Pre-K 3**

I began teaching second grade here at Star of the Sea in 2003. I currently teach PreK3, but have also taught first and third grades at our wonderful school. I was first introduced to Star of the Sea as a nanny for two children who attended here and fell in love with this very family oriented environment. I completed my bachelor's degree at Virginia Wesleyan during my time as a nanny. My husband and I then relocated to Connecticut where I completed my Master's Degree in education at Saint Joseph College. We returned to Virginia Beach, and I returned to Star of the Sea as an educator. Now as a mother of two beautiful children I am very pleased to have my children join me here on their own educational and faith journey. As a parent I'm very pleased with the high academic standards as well as the nurturing Christ-centered environment my children are a part of each day. As a teacher here I enjoy working as a partner with parents not only to educate children academically but also spiritually. My husband and I have chosen both Star of the Sea for our children and myself because we wanted something more than just a school and a job. We wanted a place that was an extension of our family, home, and values, and we found it here at Star of the Sea.

### **Mrs. Isabel Valentini, Pre-K 4**

I have been a member of the Star of the Sea family since 2000 when my son Michael was a Pre-K student. I began teaching Pre-K 4 at SOS in 2002. I am originally from California (Go Raiders) where I attended Catholic schools. I graduated from Virginia Wesleyan College in 1992 with a degree in Elementary Education and a certification for grades Pre-K through 8<sup>th</sup> grade. I was awarded the Virginia Association of Science Teachers' (VAST) Elementary School award for Outstanding Science Teacher in 2009 and have authored two children's counting books, *Over in the Graveyard* and *Over in the Barnyard*.

### **Mrs. Lisa Dube, Kindergarten**

I am originally from Massachusetts and graduated from Bridgewater State College in 1991 with a Bachelors of Science in Elementary Education. I moved to Virginia Beach 1994 and have decided to call this area home. I am the proud parent of a Star of the Sea Alumnus who is currently studying at the College of William and Mary.

Star of the Sea School became my home away from home in 1998 when I began teaching kindergarten. It has been many years since that first kindergarten class and I feel honored and blessed to still be here. I learn and experience new things everyday through the eyes of the children. In the words of Robert Fulghum, “All I really needed to know I learned in Kindergarten.”

### **Mrs. Glenn Dannenfelser, Kindergarten**

Graduate of Holy Trinity Catholic School, Norfolk Catholic High School and Old Dominion University

B.A. Speech Communication - ODU

Collegiate Professional License in Early and Primary Education: PreK - 3rd Grade - ODU

Grades taught at SOS: Pre-Kindergarten 3, Pre-Kindergarten 4, and Kindergarten

Started the Pre-K 3 Year Old program at SOS in 2010

Married to the late George Dannenfelser for 25 years

Daughters: Hayden- (SOS class of 2007) and Reid- (SOS class of 2015)

I have been a member of the Star of the Sea School community since 1995. I enjoy teaching at a Catholic school because it allows me to share my faith with my students. I also like the close-knit community of families that makes our school so great!

### **Mrs. Diana Socha, 1st Grade & Vice Principal**

I have been part of the Star of the Sea Community since 1989 and have been sharing my faith and love for learning for over 30 years. Originally from the Windy City of Chicago, I am a graduate of Catholic schools starting in first grade through graduating from Loyola University of Chicago. I majored in Spanish Literature and pursued studies in Cuernavaca Mexico. I continued my studies in the Teacher Education Program at the University of Iowa before relocating to Virginia Beach in 1989 with my husband, a professor at Old Dominion University. My daughter and son, both in college, are graduates of Star of the Sea School. I am proud to play a part in the growth and development of primary and early education in Catholic schools as well as serving as Vice Principal. I believe that when children are surrounded by faith and love they will flourish. It is rewarding for me to teach in a community of faith filled families, who together with Star of the Sea School form a strong Christ –centered foundation.

### **Mrs. Shaun Choffel, 2nd Grade**

I love teaching! I didn't start out as a teacher, but came to it later in life. I like to joke that God was calling me to teach all along but I wasn't listening. As cliché as it might sound, one day I looked in the mirror and realized that I hadn't found my passion and that's the day I prayed for God to open my heart so that I could hear what he wanted me to do. On that day, I began my teaching adventure and I've never looked back.

Even though I didn't start out as a teacher, I did begin my own Catholic education at an early age. I attended Catholic school from kindergarten through seventh grade. I loved my experience

so much that I wanted that same experience for my own daughter and she attended Catholic school from first grade through twelfth grade.

I am a graduate of the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. In addition to teaching, I hold degrees in Political Science and Clothing & Textiles. I began teaching in Catholic schools in 2002 and am certified to teach PreK – fourth grade. In 2004, I was awarded the Technology Teacher of the Year award at my former school. I joined Star of the Sea in 2009 and I am blessed to be teaching second grade. I love the collaboration between teachers, the small class sizes, and the opportunities to pray, sing and share my faith with my students.

### **Mrs. Brenda Morris, 4th Grade**

One thing that resonates with me and Star of the Sea has been the warm community feeling I felt from the very first day I became a part of the SOS family. It was and has always been a welcoming spirit, and as a non-Catholic, I have been able to embrace and respect the Catholic Identity here at Star of the Sea. I feel very comfortable in sharing my faith with my students every day, and I was elated as I helped my students experience God's love through gospel praise dancing. Serving God is as diverse as God's people. I also enjoy using music, art and dance in the academic areas. It is fun and exciting!

I think traditions are important to keep and instill in our young people today as those ideas will always be important to the growth of our students. The traditions we have here at SOS need to be embraced as this is what makes us special.

Finally, when a former student comes back to visit or a student presently here at SOS comments that I was their “favorite” or “best” teacher or they want to become a teacher because of something I did, then that's a feather in my hat for a job well done!

### **Mrs. Kristine Mitchell, 5th Grade**

I grew up in Chicago, Illinois and attended Southern Illinois University in Carbondale where I received my BS in elementary education. I am certified to teach elementary education (K-9) and middle school mathematics. I have taught math and science at the middle school level in Chicago and Hawaii in both Catholic and public schools. I have had a lesson appear in the Cuisenaire Rods 75th Anniversary commemorative booklet. My SOSRegions Wiki appeared in a short article on CII's Interactive website and was presented at the annual VAST conference for science teachers. My husband is a senior chief in the Navy, so when we were transferred here, I was interviewing for teaching positions. I wasn't initially thrilled with the prospect of teaching fifth grade since I consider myself a middle school math teacher, but it was the warm welcome given by Mrs. Hess when my husband and I entered the building for my interview that turned me around. This same kind of welcoming and family feel was what made me convert to Catholicism in the first place some 20 years ago.

### **Mrs. Myriam Traub, Spanish 6-8 and Religion 6 & 8**

I am from Colombia, South America. My certification is in Spanish and French. The students here at Star of the Sea really enjoy learning a foreign language. They are able to develop a

deeper understanding of the importance of another language and culture. This year I have been blessed to teach Religion. It's a wonderful opportunity to help them understand more about the Catholic faith and help them develop a better relationship with Christ.

### **Mrs. Lowery VanBuskirk, 6th Grade & Middle School Social Studies and Math 6**

I am a middle school teacher at Star of the Sea Catholic School with twelve years of teaching experience, eight of those at SOS. In 1996, I earned a Master's Degree in Special Education from Old Dominion University. Continuing to master my craft, I have added endorsements in Elementary Education and Middle School Social Studies to my Virginia State License. I have also earned an Advanced Technology Certificate from the Diocese of Richmond.

Yearbook Advisor, NJHS Sponsor, and School Improvement Chair are additional roles that are important to me and my commitment to make Star of the Sea the best it can be. Actively engaged students are the most productive, and my classroom is student-centered. Hands-on activities, music, integrated lessons, flexible groups, and technology are used on a daily basis. Sounds from my classroom confirm that learning is happening all the time. Teaching at SOS allows me to share the Catholic faith with my students and fellow teachers. This is a unique and cherished gift that makes Star of the Sea not just a school, but a second home.

I enjoy living in Virginia Beach with my husband, fifteen year old son, thirteen year old daughter, and Giant Schnauzer.

### **Ms. Melinda Mericle, 7th Grade & Middle School Science**

Education -

BS in Psychology 1977 ODU

MS in Rehabilitation Counseling 1979 East Carolina University

Career Switcher Program - 2011 Regent University

MS in Education - 2012 Regent University

Career History - teaching

Fall 2010 - Provisional License with endorsement in Earth Science

Star of the Sea - started November 1, 2010

Star of the Sea was definitely God's plan and not mine. I planned to teach in a high school in Norfolk Public Schools. God's plan is so much more amazing than anything I could have dreamed of. In June 2012 I added an endorsement for Middle School Science to my license.

### **Mrs. Mary O'Dowd, Middle School Math**

I am from Livonia, Michigan and graduated from Michigan State University, earning a Bachelor of Arts degree in Economics with concentrations in Mathematics and Computer Science. After graduation I worked as a Business Systems Analyst for two Life Insurance companies until 1994. In 2005 I began long-term substitute teaching at Star of the Sea School for 8<sup>th</sup> grade Algebra and 4<sup>th</sup> grade Math, Science and Religion. I earned my teaching certification for

secondary mathematics and social studies in 2008 from Old Dominion University. I am currently teaching 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade mathematics, 8<sup>th</sup> grade civics and 7<sup>th</sup> grade religion.

I am a strong supporter of Catholic Education. My three children have attended Catholic schools, two who are graduates of Star of the Sea and Bishop Sullivan Catholic High School. My youngest son is currently an 8<sup>th</sup> grader at Star of the Sea. The strong academic curriculum, spiritual growth and teachings of social and moral responsibility is what attracted the O'Dowd family to the Star of the Sea community.

### **Mrs. Karen Dales, Spanish Pre-K-Gr. 5 & Pre-K 4 Aide**

I began working at Star of the Sea Catholic School as a volunteer. When my daughter was in 1<sup>st</sup> grade, I began to work as a substitute teacher. Eventually this led me to become interested in teaching Spanish. I just finished my Bachelor's in Psychology on August 28, 2013. I chose to teach at SOS due to my religious beliefs, the families, and my coworkers. Star of the Sea is a place that I call my second home. I feel so comfortable being part of the SOS family. Every student at SOS is special to me. My goal every year is to learn every single student's name. I believe that students feel a sense of pride when they are called by their names. There are not many people that can say that they love their jobs. God has given me a gift that I can enjoy every day; that gift is Star of the Sea Catholic School. Thank you God for this great gift.

### **Mrs. Joanne Selig, Technology**

A product of local Catholic education: attended Holy Trinity (Norfolk) and Norfolk Catholic High  
B.S. in Education from O.D.U.  
International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE) Capstone Certificate.

It has been an honor to teach within the Catholic education system for over 33 years. As a Catholic educator, I enjoy that I'm allowed the unique opportunity to help spiritually and academically guide students as they grow in Christ. I believe that our Catholic schools provide a faith-filled environment instilling high degrees of self-confidence, self-respect, and self-discipline among students.

My daughters attended Star of the Sea Catholic School from PreK-8<sup>th</sup> grade. I truly appreciate the foundation of faith, spirit of community, and family ties found at Star of the Sea Catholic School.

### **Ms. Barbara Wilhelm, Library**

Education: Old Dominion University, bachelors and master's degrees in education  
State Licensure Endorsements: Library Media: PreK-12, Other: NK-7

I have over 20 years of experience as a classroom teacher and over 5 years as a Library Media Specialist/Librarian. Star of the Sea Catholic School has the best, caring, and most qualified teachers and administration! Our educators use their knowledge of our students' abilities, from

gifted to those in need of remediation and every level in between, and use the most appropriate educational plans and strategies to best meet the needs of all the students. As catholic school professionals, we are dedicated to meeting the educational, spiritual, social, and emotional needs of every student each day.

**Mrs. Pat Graffeo, Art**

I am the youngest of five children from an Irish Catholic family. I was raised in NY and am a product of Catholic education from kindergarten through college. Although my bachelor's degree is in Physical Education, I worked for the Vogue/Butterick pattern company after graduation while taking classes at FIT. I taught English for two years while I lived in Mexico and also worked as a Biology SOL tutor at First Colonial High School. When my youngest of three children was about to enter high school, I returned to school. I took Art classes at TCC and then completed the Career Switcher program at ODU. When I first came to Star of the Sea for an interview, I felt like I was coming home. This is my seventh year of teaching Art at SOS.

**Mrs. Shanna Flanary, Resource Teacher**

This is my fourth year as resource teacher at Star of the Sea Catholic School. I have also taught fourth grade and pre-algebra at our school, so I have an understanding of how to work closely with teachers to help meet the needs of all of our students. I graduated from Old Dominion University and have 21 years teaching experience.

I chose to work at Star of the Sea because of the wonderful teachers and parents. I was tutoring a student who lived in my neighborhood and was able to work with his teachers to assist him. When I heard of a job opening at the school, I interviewed for the pre-algebra position and was very impressed with the school as a tight-knit community. Over the years I have enjoyed various roles, and I feel that my current position as a resource teacher is a great fit. I am blessed to work with small groups from kindergarten through eighth grade, and I feel great satisfaction seeing growth in my students.