"Vigorously academic, beautifully diverse, thoroughly Christian"



That is the motto that guides the Rehoboth Christian School's new sixth grade program.

Sixth grade science teachers Kate Poortenga and Michael Baldonado started a new RCS curriculum known as "High Desert Horizons" three years ago.

Poortenga told the Sun the idea is to use the neighborhooc as a learning tool for students. She explained that this is a way for them to learn from people in the region and also from the land.

"If we understand the corners that we have in this world, we can then use that to understand the rest of our world," she said.

In the past the students have gone into downtown Gallup to walk around and talk to the people on the street. Poortenga said they've talked to shop owners and asked them what they love about Gallup and about some of their dreams for the town. She commented that this exercise allows the kids to get a feel for the pulse of the city, the culture and the people.

"So as students they can start to reflect on what's the beauty of the community of Gallup that we're a part of and what are some of the challenges, because we want to also look at that," she stated.

Another part of the curriculum looks at energy sources. They've discussed the difference between using coal and solar energy. They took a field trip to Monument Valley to observe a solar array. They learned how the array provides power to the Navajo Nation.

These field trips and speakers who visit RCS classes help to connect the school courses to the world outside.

"I love broadening students' horizons," Poortenga remarked. "One of the things I say often to my students is that they explore bravely and that we dream of the world as God desires it to be."

She went on to explain that her definition of exploring bravely could be something as simple as being a leader in the classroom and asking the hard questions, or sometimes it's just going on a hike during a field trip.

As for dreaming of the world as God desires it to be, Poortenga said she believes God wants the world to live in harmony.

"As Christians we believe that God wants to bring this world into perfect harmony, and therefore we need to recognize the ways it's not in harmony and strive to bring that back," she stated. "That's what I want sixth graders to recognize, is that they have power to do these [things]. They have a voice. They have ability to change the world right now, not just in their future, but right now.

“Sometimes we find the broken and we talk about what we can do to mend that brokenness,” she continued.

Because of COVID-19, Poortenga said she’s had to dig deep and present her own experiences to students, since field trips and live speakers were beyond safe boundaries.

In the past she has been able to bring in people with personal knowledge of subjects that came up in textbooks and studies — as in the case of the person who talked about brain tumors when students were learning about the brain.

When it comes to next year Poortenga says there’s isn’t a plan for the program quite yet.

“As a school we have not yet heard or made any plans as to what the next year will look like,” she said. “I think there’s definitely that bated breath hope that everything will be back to a 100 percent in-person and we can travel and go places.

Therefore, if we’re able to do that, I want to get to a lot of places. There are so many amazing national parks and Navajo Nation parks in our area,” she said.

Some of the places Poortenga wants to visit include a return to Monument Valley and a visit to Petrified Forest National Park.

Her big dream is to take students to the Grand Canyon for a couple of days. She described all the things they could study there, including the geology, the plant life, the people who lived there in the past, and the history of the Canyon itself, learning about how and when it became a national park and the efforts to protect it.