

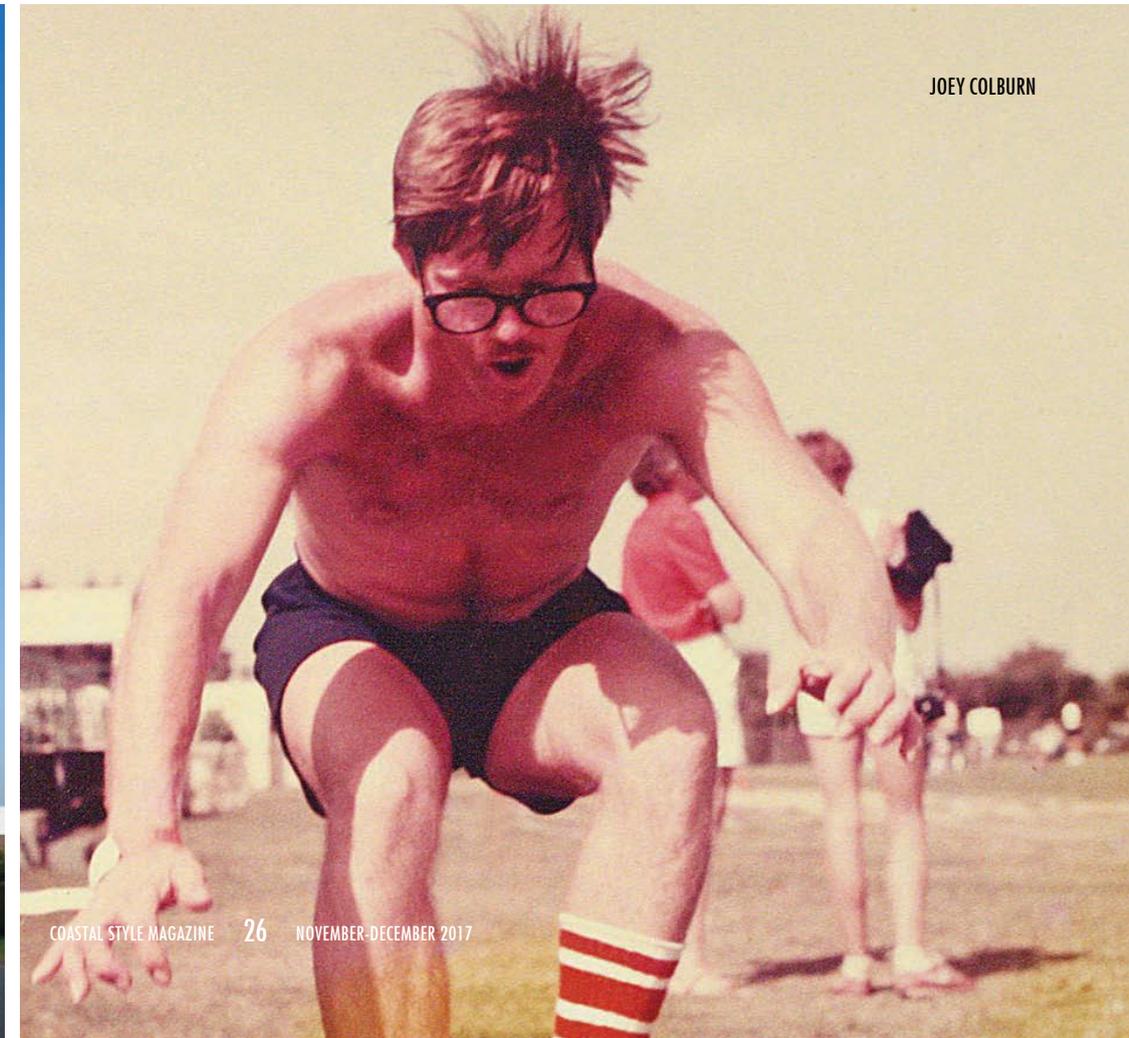
EDUCATION

SISTERS
OF
ST. BENEDICT



BENEDICTINE: *A Legacy of Care*

Story and Photography by Devon Bistarkey



JOEY COLBURN

Along a winding road in Caroline County, dotted with farm fields not far from Tuckahoe State Park on Maryland's Eastern Shore, a small brick entrance reads Sisters of St. Benedict. The burgundy buttress marks the start of a long tree-lined drive, culminating in the campus of Benedictine Programs and Services.

A weathered crest of the Order of Saint Benedict, still visible on its sign, serves as a relic to the school's origins and, in a small way, unintentionally perpetuates the notion that nuns in distinctive habits and veils still roam the halls.

Founded in 1887 by the Sisters of the Order of St. Benedict with the purchase of 500 acres of farmland near the town of Ridgely, a monastery was built. Through the ensuing years, the Sisters, as part of their missionary service, established St. Gertrude's, an academy for girls, on the grounds.

The rural land evolved from the property previously known simply as The Plains. However, what began to grow here wasn't just seeds but the buds of potential in a few flowering students.

It wasn't until 70 years after that land purchase that the Sisters found a new purpose in caring for and educating children and adults with developmental disabilities.

"The Sisters saw a need and began serving," said Julie Hickey, Benedictine's director of education. "This was far before it was the 'in thing to do,' far before any laws or regulations indicated that this was something that needed to happen."

Then named the Benedictine School for Exceptional Children, the school began with just four boys diagnosed with Down syndrome and the mission to help students achieve their greatest potential —

a mission that is still just as important to the school today.

One student, who joined Benedictine during its humble beginnings, was Joey Colburn, also born with Down syndrome, in 1957, in Baltimore. At the time of his diagnosis, Joey's father, James "Jim" Colburn, had resolved to do everything in his power to make his son's life as productive as possible.

Jim's resolve led him to the Benedictine School, where he found an institution dedicated to the very same things he wanted for his son: self-sufficiency and family values. Joey was 5 years old when he arrived at the Benedictine School, becoming one of the school's youngest residents.

Joey learned to swim at Benedictine and soon began setting swimming records at the school. When Benedictine hosted the Special Olympics swimming competition, Joey took part in the swimming and running competitions. He's won over 100 Special Olympics medals and ribbons in his lifetime.

Later, Joey and his father moved to Florida, on medical advice that a warmer climate could extend Joey's lifespan, as individuals with Down syndrome tended to live shorter lives.

After Joey died at age 60 on March 4, 2017, the Benedictine Foundation became the recipient of a \$3 million bequest from Jim Colburn, the largest single gift in the history of Benedictine.

According to Barry Smale, director of the Benedictine Foundation: "This bequest is significant because Jim Colburn recognized the need at Benedictine today to care for children who are much more severely disabled than his son, Joey, and require a higher level of assistance. Bequests of this type enable Benedictine to continue to meet the needs of its chang-

ing population. We are grateful for his foresight to plan for this gift and to make us its recipient."

The Colburn's generosity and affection for Benedictine, much like the Sisters, continues to leave a lasting impression here.

While the campus may best be known by the legacy of the Sisters, who started their work on the rural Eastern Shore nearly 60 years ago, Benedictine today continues to transform as a modern education center for children and adults with multiple disabilities and autism.

Following the sale of the school property in 2015, a newly created independent nonprofit organization was established. Since then, the Sisters' presence here continues to be cherished. In total, 11 Sisters still call the convent on campus home, and of that group, two actively participate in the daily routine, though dressed now in more modern apparel.

The sale represented a milestone for what has become a legacy of care for the differently abled in both Maryland and the nation.

"The Sisters made the decision to transfer the school and the property to the board of directors to ensure that Benedictine will, in the future, be able to continue the Sisters' mission to provide, in the Benedictine spirit, a quality education and opportunities for these special children and adults," said Scott Evans, executive director of Benedictine.

Today, Benedictine, through its 450 staff, provides school- and community-based programs for 75 children and more than 100 adults. These individuals come from almost every county in Maryland, as well as from states throughout the Mid-Atlantic, to any of the mission's 19 group homes along Maryland's Upper Shore and Annapolis or its vocational training center in Easton. ➡

A TRADITION OF SERVICE: 2017 MARKS THE 130TH YEAR OF SERVICE FOR THE SISTERS OF ST. BENEDICT, WHICH BEGAN AS AN ACADEMY FOR GIRLS AND TODAY, AS BENELECTINE, THRIVES AS A VITAL CENTER FOR CHILDREN AND ADULTS WITH DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES.



ACTIVE LEARNING: BENEDICTINE STUDENTS PARTICIPATE IN FINE-MOTOR-SKILL DEVELOPMENT THROUGH ARTS AND CRAFTS.

As a licensed nonprofit, Benedictine Programs and Services is a nationally recognized, accredited and cost-effective educational living-and-learning environment that includes adult services with career exploration classes, supported employment and community services, along with residential-living options on-campus and in the community.

Building on the core values of compassionate caring, dignity of work and hospitality, set by the Sisters of St. Benedict, the work remains focused on helping those served here achieve their greatest potential.

Benedictine is, in many ways, a leader in the transformation of care for individuals with multiple disabilities, diligently working toward the goal of creating a meaningful life for all.

“Everything is about choice — what is important to the person not for the person is the focus of our person-centered plan for the individuals we support,” said Robin McDuffie, adult-services project manager.

Educated staff from therapists to special educators, continue to evolve and exceed the standard of care for individuals with disabilities. As one of the largest employers on the Eastern Shore, teams of special-education teachers, therapists, social workers, behavioral counselors and administrative-support personnel make Benedictine a leading provider in adaptive-care services.

“The school and programs have a great national reputation of providing some of the best initiatives to help people with disabilities achieve their very highest potential in a wonderfully compassionate and nurturing environment,” said Barry Smale, director of the school’s foundation. “The Sister’s vision of what the Benedictine community could do for children, youth and adults with intellectual disabilities continues to be far-reaching, profound and inspirational.”

To learn more about Benedictine Programs and Services, visit BenSchool.org.

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— Barry Smale, Benedictine’s foundation director



A LOOK BACK: ELEANOR SWEENEY DESIO, KNOWN AS SISTER MICHAEL MARIE, WITH STUDENTS ON BENEDICTINE LANE CIRCA 1960.

A CAMPUS COVERED IN CHROME

The Benedictine campus is the unusual home to Maryland’s largest escorted classic car and motorcycle ride, the Chrome City Ride, an annual fundraising event that transforms a once-functioning monastery into a chrome-covered campus.

Since the inaugural ride in 2001, the event has paved the way for more than \$1 million in funds raised to support the children and adults served by Benedictine Programs and Services.

In total, nearly 10,000 participants over the years have made their way down the lane onto the Benedictine campus in Ridgely, Md.

Notable attendees in years past include Candy Clark and Bo Hopkins, from the George Lucas 1973 classic *American Graffiti*, as well as area politicians.

The event attracts Hollywood donors, too. For more than five years, car enthusiast Jay Leno has donated to the event, as well as a collector from New Jersey who donated a 1941 Willys Pro Street Coupe in 2016. This year’s event brought the highest attendance and most donations with a total of \$121,000 raised. 🌊