



Tiny classes: **big results**

*Learning to learn at
Landmark East school*

BY JODI DELONG

It has been changing lives (some say it's been saving lives) for nearly 40 years.

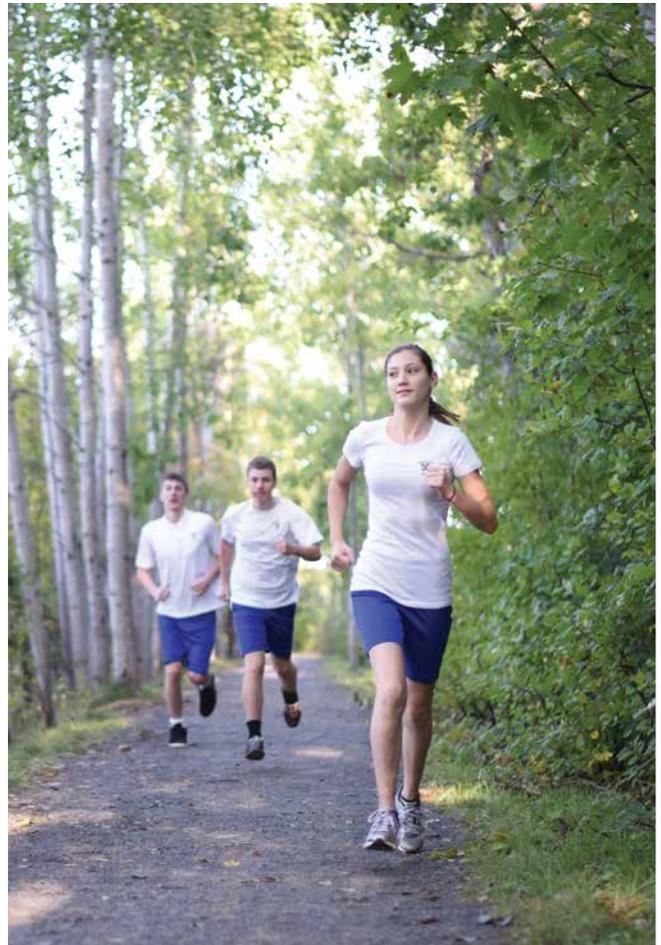
It looks like any schoolyard on any school day. Kids of all ages, together with their teachers, are engaged in a variety of physical activities—soccer, ultimate Frisbee, touch football—and the schoolyard is alive with laughter and banter. A short, sharp buzzer sounds, and the kids disappear into several buildings, emerging shortly thereafter in tidy school uniforms, lugging book-bags and knapsacks, chattering away with their friends as they head off to classes.

Sounds like an ordinary day at any school, doesn't it? This is no ordinary school. Welcome to Landmark East (LME), in Wolfville, NS, unique in Canada as a boarding and day-school educational facility for children with barriers to learning.

An idea takes root

The school began in the late 70s, when four Nova Scotian families with learning-challenged children who attended specialized boarding schools in the US got to discussing how they could get help for their children closer to home. They reached out to Dr. Charles Drake, who had established a facility in Massachusetts dedicated to helping children with learning disabilities. Himself dyslexic, Dr. Drake was well positioned to understand the needs of children who were otherwise slipping through the cracks, and was willing to help start a similar program in eastern Canada.

The parents wanted the school to have residential possibilities, and serendipitously, a building came available in 1977 in Wolfville. Formerly known as the Paramount Hotel, its hotel-room sized rooms were ideally suited for small, inti-



COURTESY OF LANDMARK EAST

Clockwise from above: Students at Landmark East enjoy daily classes of Sparkfit activity program, with 10 different programs to choose from; small classes allow for one-on-one teaching, if needed; Classwork includes getting out in nature.

mate classes; it had a kitchen and dining room; and behind it was a small motel, with individual rooms each with their own bathroom facilities, perfect for dorm rooms. It was meant to be. The school welcomed its first 10 students in 1979, offering classes for children for grades 7 to 9.

Peter Coll has been headmaster at Landmark East since 2010. He says, “We help kids from all over the world. Usually they’ve been having difficulties at school for a while, and if you’re a parent, you’ll do anything you can to advocate for your child. At some point, we get a phone call and the parent says, ‘My child is struggling and we need a different approach.’” The students are all of normal or above-average intelligence, and coming to the school even for a couple of years can make a huge difference. The approach includes small classes (sometimes only a single student) with adaptations, accommoda-

tions and modifications to help the child be successful. “We look at what a kid can do rather than what they can’t.”

Today, enrollment at Landmark is generally 70 to 75 students, with 47 staff to support them. Of those, 60 per cent are day school students, many of them from around Kings and neighbouring counties, although Coll says families move to Wolfville from all over the world: “They’ll upend their lives so kids can come to this school,” he says. The remainder of students are boarders from across Canada and from other countries, including Mexico, Russia, China, the Caribbean.

A high school component was added in the late 1990s, with the first graduating class in 1999. Coll says, “It’s an interesting assumption to put a timeline on remediation of a learning disability, because it doesn’t take into account the complexities of individual students.” Students don’t develop a learning disability at a certain age, he explains, and “If we can identify that early, before someone feels poorly about themselves, or develop bad habits, before they struggle with social and emotional behaviours, that helps everyone succeed.” In consultations with the board and staff of the school, he floated the idea of starting an elementary program for grades 1 to 6 not long after he started at LME, and today, in theory, a child could spend their entire 12 years of schooling at Landmark.

Not every potential student is a fit. “There are kids we realize ahead of time that we don’t have the capacity or training or understanding to assist,” Coll says, “but we can often refer parents to a facility that will help. We don’t have the capacity for kids with severe behavioural issues, or those coming out of drug or alcohol dependency. It’s much better for us to be a little bit narrow in what we can do but to be able to deliver hugely for those we can help.”

Flying high thanks to Landmark

Thomas (Tom) Paul was born in the United Kingdom and was diagnosed with a learning difference as a child. An aunt who lived in Pugwash, NS, knew of Landmark East and suggested to his parents that this might be a good option for him. Tom says, “I had been in support classes in England that had little effect on me, other than isolation. I was taken out of the general classes a few times a week which kept me away from my classmates. We also tried tutoring with little success.” His parents wanted to immigrate to Canada (his mother is Canadian, his father British) so the family moved to Wolfville in 1998.

When Tom arrived at Landmark as a 10-year-old, he was reading at the grade level of a kindergarten student. By the end of his first year, he was back on par with others of his age. He remained at the school for grades 5 through 12, graduating as valedictorian and receiving the Queen Elizabeth medal for excellence in education.

While still a student at LME, Tom took his private pilot’s licence from Moncton Flight College (MFC) as part of the Royal Canadian Air Cadets, and following graduation, he returned to MFC and trained for his commercial pilot license, instructor rating and diploma in aviation technology. He



COURTESY OF LANDMARK EAST



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Clockwise from top: Students in a chemistry class; Landmark's headmaster, Peter Coll (centre) jokes with a couple of students; airline captain and Landmark graduate Thomas Paul in the cockpit of his plane; hands-on work in a science class; students enjoying soccer during their SparkFit class.

taught flight students until 2011 when he began flying commercially, and now is with regional carrier WestJet Encore as a training captain.

Of his time at Landmark East, Tom says, "Landmark teaches many things, but the most valuable is learning to learn." The staff were able to decode Tom's way of processing information, and when he finally learned how to learn, "I could not get enough. I became a sponge for information, and the skills and techniques I learned at LME made postsecondary easy."

Governance, funding and fundraising

Landmark East has a board of directors who set policy and oversee the operation and have fiduciary responsibility for the school. The board of trustees administers and grows the school's 1.3 million-dollar endowment which generates \$50,000 to \$70,000 each year in bursary funds.

There is a common misconception about LME; that it is a private, and for-profit school, which is not so. It's a not-for-profit school run and owned by a volunteer board of directors. Any profits made are used to put money into the bursary fund, and for maintenance and other requirements that come with running a facility.

Originally, the school received funding from APSEA (the Atlantic Provinces Special Education Association), which ended in the mid 1990s. This almost meant the end of the school but the board began recruiting international students whose families saw a need and a chance for their children to benefit. They began negotiations with the province for more funding, arguing that everyone has a right to be in a classroom no matter their learning challenge, but also should be in the best possible place in order to thrive.

LME is officially designated as a special education private school, (DESP), one of three in Nova Scotia; it and its teachers are licensed and certified by the province. Because of this, if children qualify to attend the school, they can receive up to \$17,000 in support, based on per-pupil rate throughout the mainstream education system. Since LME class sizes are tiny, there isn't the same amount of funding flowing into the school as one that has hundreds of students, so they receive a higher per-student rating. This rate covers 65 to 70 per cent of tuition costs for the school, and the bursary program closes that gap to something that most families can manage. "That's another reason why the fit of a student is so important," Coll says. "We don't have an endless stream of funds, so we make sure bursaries are going to a child who is a good fit for us so we can make a difference in their lives."

Building on success

Recently, Landmark East began laying the groundwork for a significant capital campaign. "Building on Success" will



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allow them to their current facilities and have more space for more students. They don't have their own performance art space, nor a gymnasium—the kids are transported to Acadia and other facilities for some SparkFit programming or team sports, and performances take place in the dining hall—so the school has embarked on 2.8-million-dollar project for a multi-purpose facility.

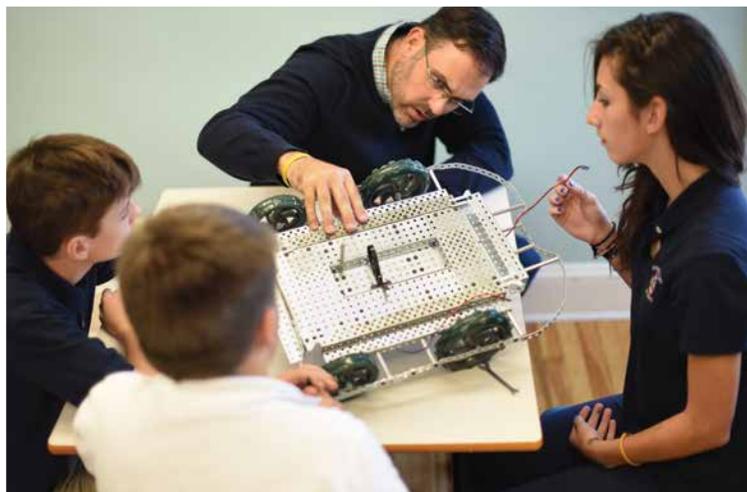
Henry Hicks' involvement with LME goes back to the late 1980s. "We had a son who had a severe learning challenge and was going nowhere in school, and we were probably driving the teachers crazy," he says. "They were doing their best but it wasn't the intensity of the help he needed, so we decided to try Landmark. Our son attended as a boarding student for several years then went back into the regular school system, graduated with honours, and has been a functional citizen with his own business ... none of which would have happened without Landmark East."

Following his son's success at the school, Hicks, who operated a successful financial service business in the Annapolis Valley, was approached by the board of the school with plans to start a foundation. "The objective was to raise funds to allow kids from Nova Scotia who couldn't afford the tuition to attend the school," he says. He chaired the board for a time, before moving on to head a major fundraising campaign for the regional hospital.

With that project completed, Hicks was invited back to Landmark East to help with fundraising, and came as honorary chair of the Building on Success project. He's had generous responses from several organizations, including Sobeys, local Rotary groups, and the Johnson Foundation out



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COURTESY THOMAS (TOM) PAUL

website or video will ever be able to explain how important LME is for students with learning differences... The best way to understand it is to visit the school, meet the students and staff, see the class structures, see the sports program, see the hands-on workshops... see Landmark in action.”

of Florida. Such support attracts media attention and raises the school’s profile with the public, paving the way to do more fundraising. “It’s one thing to raise funds for a hospital—everyone knows what a hospital does, and needs it at one time or another. The school takes a little more promotion.” Hicks says. With the 40th anniversary of the school approaching, he’d love to have the funding campaign commitments confirmed and the building begun.

Fundraising is all about relationships, not just asking for money. Peter Coll says, “We build a relationship, explain the need, point out how someone can make a difference, and often there is no need to ask for anything—it just happens.” He works closely with Paula Aceto, LME’s director of development, and is always available to speak at functions and meet with organizations and individual donors.

Wolfville resident Jan Savage taught school for 21 years before moving into a career in financial services. She’s been on the board of Landmark East for the past decade, and is currently completing her third year as board chair. She didn’t hesitate when invited to join the board. “It was an opportunity to be of service; one of my first loves is education and the learning process, and the business side of me saw a way I might be able to contribute.” She’s very excited about the building campaign, and fiercely proud of the school’s success with children from around the world.

Tom Paul continued to volunteer for LME after graduation, and currently serves as vice-chair of the foundation, plus sits on the bursary committee, which determines how the limited bursary money is distributed.

Of the school that changed his life, Tom says, “No brochure,

Life-changing facility

Henry Hicks is equally passionate about the work that Landmark East does. “I feel it saves their lives, it straightens them up,” he says firmly. “Over 80 per cent of students go on to post-secondary institutions and furthering their education, and the work done at Landmark is nothing short of amazing.” The kids develop manners, they learn responsibilities—the boarding students are responsible for doing their laundry and cleaning their rooms, for example—and they gain experiences outside the typical mainstream situation. “There’s so much more to education than what you get from a book,” he says.

Like his colleagues, Hicks is adamant that what Landmark does is not a criticism of the mainstream education system. “Teachers at other schools are some of Landmark’s greatest supporters,” he says. “They know when they’re dealing with a dynamic that isn’t working, and they want these kids in a place where they’ll get the most help. They’re part of the solution.” He does stress that although Landmark’s teachers are rewarded with tremendous job satisfaction from helping their students, they sacrifice financially to work at the school. “They receive less salary than in the public system, and as the school becomes more successful, hopefully the school can raise their salaries. They’re doing life-changing work.”

Watching a group of students engaged in a free-spirited soccer game, Peter Coll says, “It’s an honour to work here, to come here every day and solve problems. You see a difference in a child as they start to learn that they can do things; it’s one of the most satisfying things you could ever imagine as an educator.

“So that’s what we want to keep going in Wolfville.” 🐾