

# Hillside High students incorporate faith into school



The prayer circle allows Hillside students to participate in meditation and ease their worries about the upcoming school day. They hope bringing faith into the school will help bring about change in the community.

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In an age when teenagers crave social media popularity, students at Hillside High School are showing their peers the powerful impact that comes from stepping out of the norm.

Every school morning at 8:50, the halls of Hillside are filled with sleepy faces, young couples and a growing number of teenagers eager to participate in a daily prayer service.

“We have praise of worship; we do revival,” ninth-grader Aaliyah Peterson said before a Friday morning service. “We have over 20 people getting saved each and every week. It’s a great experience.”

Five student leaders wait for the perfect opportunity to gather their peers in a giant circle consuming the front lobby area. Then, around 120 students and faculty members join hands and share 10 minutes of mindfulness before school starts.

Silence.

Next, a humble voice breaks the silence, praying for a safe and productive school day and giving thanks to God for the previous day.

The student leaders alternate leading the service with conviction and heart. They said they believe it’s their calling.

“Faith is kind of the key ingredient,” prayer leader Daniel Gwyn said. “A lot of people involved in the school might not go to church, so if they see our faith, then they might begin to have it.”

Gwyn, a 12th-grader and creator of the service, has been attending church and youth group for only six months, but he said his newfound faith has changed his life.

“It’s helped me be a better leader,” he said. “I was selfish before, and it’s helped me figure out that a lot of people need more help than I do.”

Gwyn gives credit to his youth leaders, Manny Arango and Anthony Lewis, for his reasoning behind creating the service. But Arango insists he only provided a helping hand.

“Daniel started this,” he said. “Once he started it, me and Anthony just threw fuel on the fire.”

## Schoolwide Impact

Although the service is short, the meditation provides tangible benefits for the students. Gary Kaye, an adjunct journalism professor at UNC-Chapel Hill, said meditation helps with anxiety and stress and has mental and physical advantages.

The students said that coming together and sharing moments of prayer helps them

ease any anxieties about their school days.

“The prayer service starts the day off,” said ninth-grader Kamryn Sneed. “It helps me be worry-free and prepares me for the day.”

Gwyn said the prayer group has grown exponentially since it began in January. Students spread the word about the service through social media and physical flyers posted throughout the school.

“It started little, and then it grew and grew,” said 10th-grader Taylor Pierce. “Now just about everybody is looking forward to prayer in the morning.”

For the students, the sense of solidarity draws them to join hands every morning.

“It’s just so powerful, being able to come together,” said Tierra Sims, also a 10th-grader. “When you see other people do it, it makes you want to go do it, and then you learn from it.”

Though many participants have been attending church for their whole lives, students tend to agree with Daniel’s sentiment that including faith at school has the power to make remarkable changes in the community. Ninth-grader Aaliyah Peterson deems the positive effects of prayer essential and hopes for change.

“Everything that we got to deal with – fighting and all the gun violence and everything – I feel like we need faith and God when we’re going through the day,” Peterson said. “A lot of kids around here don’t go to church, and they’re on the streets doing things like that.”

## Fixing Current Issues

The prayer circle is struggling to get Latino students to join the faith community. Ninth-grader Maria Belen Lopez said she and her friends are apprehensive about attending the service.

“We didn’t join because we don’t know what’s going on,” Belen Lopez said. “We don’t even know what it is.”

Arango said this is a deep-rooted issue, but he wants to bring in someone who prays in Spanish to bring attention to the divide.

“That’s my immediate solution,” he said.

Gwyn also prioritizes togetherness and makes an effort to provide breakfast as a small incentive for any student who wants to join the prayer circle.

“My favorite days are Tuesdays because we give out free donuts, and so many people make sure they’re here for that,” he said. “We want there to be change in the culture.”