



**SAINT THOMAS
THE APOSTLE**
ROMAN CATHOLIC PARISH

AN INTERVIEW WITH THE VILLANUEVA FAMILY

featured in the September 2022 issue of THE APOSTLE PARISH NEIGHBORS magazine

A LITTLE BACKGROUND

How long have you been members of Saint Thomas?

As a family, we have been parishioners of St. Thomas since July of 2011. But Naomi and the Junker family have been involved with the parish and school since the early 1980s. Naomi and her brothers and sister attended STA as children 1984-2001. Her mother Karen, sister Laura, sister in law Sarah have taught at STA and her aunt Janice currently teaches at STA.

Tell us about your family.

Mark 41, Naomi 41, Sophia 14, Paul 12, Jack 10, George, 7 and Julia 4. Our dog, Ollie 3. Naomi and I met at the University of Dallas. We were in the same class and graduated in 2003. We were married at Brophy Chapel in 2007. Bishop Wall was our celebrant.

Mark is a doctor, currently in practice at Mayo Clinic and Naomi is a stay-at-home mom since 2007. Their children attend Saint Thomas the Apostle Roman Catholic School and enjoy swim, soccer, football, reading, baseball and dance.

We love watching basketball and especially love the Phoenix Suns and Cardinals! We developed a love for football too when we lived in Chicago and began to follow the Bears. It gave us something to look forward to on those bitter cold, snowy Sundays- Mass and then football! We love spending time together at the beach or in the mountains when we find time in our busy schedules to get away as a family.

IN THE COMMUNITY

What do you enjoy about being a part of our Saint Thomas community?

We have enjoyed many aspects of life at STA but in particular the community has been wonderful not only for our children but for Naomi and myself as well. Seeing the children and parents on cam-

pus each morning, then again at mass on the weekends, at sports and social events really helps build a strong Catholic community that feels like an extension of our own family.

We definitely experienced the collective support of the STA community during Naomi's recent breast cancer diagnosis and treatment last year. We are so thankful for the outpouring of support from day to day life with meals and laundry service to the overwhelming amount of prayers and love. Masses and prayers were offered throughout the US and all the way to Lourdes, France. Our children were allowed to keep life as normal as possible with the community's support for which we are eternally grateful.

Are you involved in Saint Thomas ministries through your parish?

Naomi has been involved with the PTO for the past 8 years. She has been the Chair of Hospitality for the last three years. When an STA school family has a life changing event such as the birth of a child or is dealing with an illness, or death, she helps coordinate assistance and support from the community. This support is often arranged through meal trains or other day to day support. Eight years ago we lost our son, Gabriel, at 18 weeks gestation. When I returned home from delivering him at the hospital my home was filled with flowers, meals, snacks for the kids and a meal train filled for weeks. This was all done from friends of mine I had made at a workout group for moms of young children. I will never forget the feeling of support that gave me; the feeling that others cared about the pain I was going through and they weren't afraid to show up and help in the worst of times. I wanted to bring that and grow that feeling here at STA. So when the PTO president at the time approached me about expanding the hospitality service at STA I knew it was exactly what I needed to do. Giving back to our community is always a priority for us. Little did I know I would be on the receiving end a short time later when I was diagnosed with cancer in May of 2021. It reminded me how important it is to be able to humble yourself and receive the help of others.

I [Mark] was recently on the school Advisory Board for the last three years and was Vice President my last year. It was a pleasure to serve STA and support Mrs. Coffman and Mrs. Zeches, the faculty and community. I served on the Covid Response team with faculty members, Dr. Kellie Kruger and our school nurse Lisa Weisenberger. Together, we provided advice and recommendations on how to navigate through the pandemic. We were able to address all aspects of the health of the whole child - physical, social, emotional and spiritual health by keeping the school open, continuing in-person learning and attending weekly mass with Fr. Steve's help, of course.

What would you say to someone who is sitting on the sidelines, attending Mass each week but is not sure they are ready to commit to serving at the parish?

We have all been given unique gifts by God and we are continually asked to share those talents with our community. It's just a matter of being open to listening to what God is asking of you. We have tried to share our gifts when called upon especially to give back to a school and parish that have given us so much. Also, if you aren't sure where to begin or what you're called to do, just do something! The first volunteer positions I held were not my favorite but by doing them I learned a lot about myself and was able to figure out what I did enjoy doing or was better at than other positions.

WORDS ON FAITH

How has faith played a role in your life?

We have been very fortunate to have each grown up in families where faith was a very strong focal point. Naomi and I met at the University of Dallas, a Catholic liberal arts school, where we grew stronger in our faith through our Catholic education in Dallas and while studying abroad in Rome, Italy. We have made it a priority to have our five children attend Catholic school because we know the impact it has on their formation and the long lasting impact it will have on their lives. Our faith plays a role in our life on a daily basis and is at the center of our marriage and family. It helps shape our thoughts and actions each minute from big decisions like Naomi's calling to motherhood to my role as a father and physician. It guides how we talk to each other and our children; how we are thankful for their individual and collective gifts, how we share them and how we ask for help and forgiveness.

Do you have a favorite Scripture verse, Saint, prayer?

[Naomi] When I was diagnosed with cancer last year, a sister at the school gave me a note, and inside the note was the Litany of Trust from the Sisters of Life. I remember reading it in the parking lot of school and just began to cry. It was the perfect prayer for me at that moment and it became the prayer I would wake up and pray every single morning. Fourteen months later I continue to pray it daily.

I was also given a card half way through my 18 weeks of chemo and the bible verse written

in it was “The Lord will fight for you; you need only to be still” (Exodus 14:14). Wow did I need to let this one seep in. I am a doer. I am a Martha. I felt like it was completely up to me to beat cancer, live for my family and protect my children as much as possible from the fear and anxiety having a sick mother can bring them. The amount of pressure I put on myself was huge and I didn’t even realize it until I read this verse. This was just one of the hundreds of nudges and signs God gave me throughout my sickness to trust him. Take a breath, believe in his goodness. So after that, I really viewed my treatment as I was just the person who’s body needed to have things done to it but I felt completely supported and literally carried through the most difficult days through the prayers of others and the grace of God.

[Mark] Through my STA men’s group that journeyed through Exodus 90, we have developed a special relationship with St. Joseph. Last year we completed the Consecration to St. Joseph by Fr. Calloway and look to St. Joseph as our model to become stronger husbands and fathers to provide for, to protect and to be truly present to our families.

**What challenges has God helped you or your family endure/overcome?
How has this changed you/your family?**

Last year, Naomi was diagnosed with breast cancer. It seemed like we were met with new challenges every day balancing the physical, emotional and spiritual health of especially Naomi but all of us, too. We learned how that type of illness affected each one of us differently. We found God’s help through each member of her treatment team from the greeters at the front desk to the nurses, PA’s, NP’s and doctors. His love was felt through our friends and family’s fervent prayers and daily sacrifice. It was through a dear friend and fellow UD graduate who is a Child and Adolescent Psychiatrist, that we learned how to talk with our children about it and how to support them through illness. As a result, our family has grown closer as our faith has grown stronger. Looking back, things happen for a reason according to God’s will and something good comes of every challenge, perhaps, not immediately and not the way we plan but eventually there is a good that comes. Now, Naomi has helped and inspired others going through their health issues. I have experienced the other side of medicine which has helped me care for my patients and their families. As for our children, they have become more compassionate...maybe not to each other all the time...but we are trying. We are not sure what good will come of this illness in each of their lives in the future but we pray they will be open to God’s will.

If you or your family had a motto to live by, what would it be?

“Be who Christ meant you to be and you will set the world on fire” Saint Catherine of Siena. This is framed by our front door. It is the last thing we see when we leave the house. I did this on purpose and I don’t know if the kids have caught on to my subliminal message or not. But God has given each of us very unique gifts and talents. Our job is to discover what they are and to use them to glorify God. Every time we leave the house there is an opportunity for us to be Christ to others. The easiest way to do that is by using our gifts and talents to serve others.

What are the joys and challenges of being a Catholic parent in the 21st century?

Being a Catholic parent requires you to be more and more counter cultural as the years progress. But that is why the school and parish community are more important than ever. Seeing our children grow in the church with their friends is such a joy. I am continually amazed with what they learn in school and how they try to live out the virtue of the week at home and with their friends. Since they were babies, we always took them to mass and we were constantly thanked by our priests for bringing them every Sunday...despite their behavior. Through the years, we have watched them be more involved in the mass and now participating with reading and singing in the choir. As for addressing challenges, we are constantly reaffirming and relying on this Catholic foundation.

Your children are still quite young, how do you instill the message of Christ at this young age?

There’s no better time to instill the message of Christ than at a young age! It is beautiful to see the pure faith and ultimate dependence children have on God. I am always trying to trust God as they trust Him! Mass behavior won’t be perfect, family rosaries might not happen as often as you’d like them to, but that is ok. God is at the center of all our decisions and everything we do and they don’t know life without that center. I am also so grateful for the faith formation they are exposed to every single day in the classroom and Saint Thomas. They pray in the morning as a whole school and also before every single class. I was a guest reader to George’s first grade class this past year and I read the class one of our family’s favorite

books. The teacher then asked the students what virtues they recognized in the story. I was absolutely blown away by the knowledge these seven year olds had of the virtues and that they could identify them in a fictitious story about a bear and a mouse! So, I feel like instilling the message of Christ becomes even easier when they are receiving it both in school and at home and they really complement and build on each other.

WORDS ON DISCIPLESHIP

What does being a disciple mean to you?

Being a disciple means trying your best to love God with all of yourself and love your neighbor. It also means that we will make mistakes and stray from what we are supposed to do from time to time and must ask for forgiveness just like St. Peter. It means being open to God's calling and following Him wherever He needs us to go.

How does being an active disciple help you grow in your relationship with Jesus?

Active discipleship implies that we take the talents and gifts we have been given and continue to use and grow them for the greater glory of God. Through our daily actions, we can serve as examples of our Catholic faith to each other and our children. We will experience joys and failures and sacrifice which will bring us closer to Jesus.

What is your hope for our parish or where do you see the future of our parish?

I love to see how our parish has grown with a deep love and appreciation for a reverent and traditional Mass. I love to see more and more young families coming every week to Mass. I love that confession is so accessible on Sundays. When we lived in Chicago we felt so blessed to be a part of Saint John Cantius parish. Their liturgy, strong sense of tradition and love and accessibility to the sacraments made it such a beautiful and thriving parish. I am so grateful to have that same community here at a diocesan parish in the desert! We are so blessed. The Saint Thomas community is truly an extension of our family. We have developed strong friendships with so many here and have all helped each other carry our crosses.