

# Her help for kids was divine intervention

**E-mail to a stranger led her to a position at school for kids with learning challenges.**

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Karen Johnson is lead teacher at The Epiphany School of Charlotte, which will open in August in Matthews on the [campus](#) of Thompson Child and Family Focus. ROBERT LAHSER - [rlahser@charlotteobserver.com](mailto:rlahser@charlotteobserver.com)

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Veteran educator Karen Johnson says it's hard to describe why she connects with children who learn differently.

This same unexplainable calling, she says, compelled her to e-mail a complete stranger in 2008 - Rev. Marty McCarthy, an Episcopal priest who she heard wanted to start a new school.

"...I am a bit bewildered as to why on several occasions your name has recently been brought up to me," Johnson wrote. She sent the e-mail shortly after ending an eight-year [teaching](#) stretch at Manus Academy in south Charlotte, a school for students with learning barriers.

"The last person to mention you is a dear friend of mine who is Jewish. A Jewish friend being the third person bringing up the name of an Episcopal priest is way too interesting to ignore."

The exchange must have been meant to be, because Johnson is now lead teacher of The Epiphany School of Charlotte, which will open in August. The school will be on the campus of Thompson Child and Family Focus in Matthews, on St. Peter's Lane. The private school is for 10- to 14-year-olds who have Asperger's syndrome, high functioning autism, sensory processing disorder, or other learning disabilities.

The school is seeking students.

The goal is to keep Epiphany small - up to 12 students in grades 5-8. Annual [tuition](#) is \$17,500.

Johnson, 47, knew very early she had an affinity for her work. Even before graduating from UNC Charlotte with an English literature degree, she said she knew she wanted to be a mom and work with children.

She quickly discovered she knew how to reach children with certain learning difficulties - high-functioning students who have challenges with their social and communication skills. Reading social cues, such as facial expressions, can be a challenge for these students, Johnson said.

"Social skills isn't just talking; it's communication, understanding what people are saying," Johnson said.

"Imagine being in a group and not looking people in the eye, because it's too confusing. It's too much going on...I was very successful in (addressing) that, and I know I can be again."

McCarthy was so intrigued by Johnson's e-mail - in which she described being compelled to pick up her teaching gift again, but wasn't sure how - that he contacted her immediately. McCarthy is launching a network of private, "Classical Christian" schools throughout the Charlotte region and wanted a school like Epiphany in the mix.

Last summer, they tested the idea of a special school on a small scale, through a week-long camp at Thompson. The 42-acre campus with walking trails, an athletic field, a chapel and classroom space proved perfect for focusing on exercise, building self-esteem, team building, and building communication and social skills.

As lead teacher for the camp, Johnson showed "a deep caring for bringing children to the fullness of their potential," according to McCarthy. "I've watched her reach towards children until she reaches them, and then she brings them out...The students know it, and they love it."

Johnson's approach makes parent Mitchell Huffman, an Epiphany board member, optimistic for his son who will attend the school. Huffman said his son hasn't been formally diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome but shows characteristics - such as trouble picking up on social cues, like facial expressions.

Huffman heard Johnson speak to youngsters during last summer's camp. She referenced Bible verse Jeremiah 1:5, which says in part, Before I formed you...I knew you...

"She basically told the kids, 'You are exactly as God made you...' That is such a powerful message to tell a child."

With the new school, Huffman said, "Parents can put their children in a safe environment, a nurturing environment, where they're not only accepted but appreciated."