

MOUNTAIN MISSION

# CHALLENGER

Summer 2024

The Newsletter of  
Mountain Mission  
School

Mountain Mission School's boys' varsity basketball team won back-to-back national championship titles in the National Association of Christian Athletes (NACA) tournament this year. Players who were participants in both the 2023 and 2024 tournaments were, from left, (front) **Alexanda Nyakemori, Kaab Dawit and Imani Chacha**; (second row) **Emmanuel Maginga, Mikiyas Wolde, Henok Wondimu, Elawi Dawit and Abel Mesfin**; (third row) **Mike Mosley**, assistant coach and **Josh Peters**, head coach; and (back) **Isaac Hood**, assistant coach.

NATIONAL  
CHAMPIONS  
**NACA**

2024 BOYS' BASKETBALL

"I will lift up  
mine eyes unto the  
hills, from whence  
cometh my help. My help  
cometh from the Lord which  
made heaven and earth."

—Psalms 121:1-2

# PAUL PLATT

## Honored with Surprise Celebration

Paul Platt knew his family had come to the Mountain Mission School campus March 10, 2024 to help celebrate his 80th birthday, (which was the day before, on March 9), but what he didn't know was that a surprise birthday celebration, attended by school administrators and MMS students who were also there to honor him for his 59 years of teaching at the Grundy school awaited him in the dining hall after church that Sunday morning.

"It was really special," Platt said about the celebration. "It completely blindsided me." Special birthday cakes made in his honor, balloons and a head table, along with a basket of more than 100 cards and letters wishing him well were presented to him. "It completely took me by surprise," Platt said.



Fifty-nine years ago, Platt arrived at MMS to begin work as a teacher at the school, but little did he know that all those years would pass between, making his time at Mountain Mission School his life's work of service, not only to the school and the children it serves, but also to God, who he is quick to point out, led him here. In 2021, he was recognized for that lifetime of service when his alma mater (1965), Dallas Christian College (DCC), in Dallas, Texas, presented him with a Lifetime Service Award "in recognition of his longtime dedicated and loving service to missions and the Kingdom of God."

At MMS, he has both taught and served as principal, among other titles. From secondary math and science to literature, grammar and history, sacred literature, Spanish and keyboarding, Platt has helped thousands of students get what they need to succeed. He also taught home repair skills and served as a substitute choir director before he became principal, a position he held for 10 years.

During his time as principal, Platt introduced the first computers for teachers and students, implemented new curriculum and organized summer remedial enrichment programs. He also served in public relations and church outreach, oversaw the renovation and equipping of the vocational-fine arts building and served as a college and career counselor for seniors.

In the residence halls, he served in the girls building for nine years, but spent 25 years in the boys building. In that time, he has also been locksmith, janitor and involved in food service stocking and inventory.

From an extracurricular standpoint, he has been drama coach, mock trial coach, track and field coach, cub master, Boy Scout Order of the Arrow coach, SWCC math competition advisor, SWCC Science Olympiad coach, a Little League basketball coach, basketball referee, yearbook advisor and chaperone for the European choir tour.

On the spiritual side, he has served as a preacher for MMS and Newhall Bible Church, as Sunday School teacher, worship leader, piano and organ accompanist, Bible Bowl advisor and worship band musician.



Outside of Mountain Mission School, he served as president of the board of the directors and set construction worker for the former New Mountain Players in Grundy; served on the board of directors, as an actor, director and set construction worker for the Artist's Collaborative Theater, with whom he still works. He also wrote a play for Mountain Mission's centennial celebration which was performed at that time. Platt said he has signed on to teach at MMS for another year, but he adds, year 60 is likely to be his last teaching year, as he is thinking of exploring some other options in the area. He is currently teaching Algebra I to eighth graders, as well as physical science and earth science to eighth and ninth graders, respectively.

# CHOIR RETURNS FROM Florida Trip



Mountain Mission School's choir recently returned from a choir trip in Florida. While there, students sang in Jacksonville, Orlando and Kissimmee for churches, an assisted living facility and at an amusement park! Students were hosted all week at a church camp, where, in their down time, they enjoyed canoeing, kayaking, fishing, playing volleyball and just relaxing.



## MMS STUDENTS VOLUNTEER TO HELP WITH FOOD PANTRY NEEDS

Mountain Mission students and staff have started volunteering at the Feeding America Southwest Virginia event in Grundy on the fourth Wednesday of every month. Teaching students about the value of volunteerism and service to community is one of the goals at MMS and the food pantry event is one way to do so. Hunger is an issue in the region for many with one out of nine neighbors in the region classified as food insecure.





## President to Address MMS Class of 2024

**D**r. Larry Taylor, president & CEO of the Association of Christian Schools International (ACSI), will be the commencement speaker for the Mountain Mission School Class of 2024, May 17.

**ACSI exists to strengthen Christian schools and equip Christian educators worldwide as they prepare students academically and inspire them to become devoted followers of Jesus Christ. Serving more than 25,000 schools in 108 countries, ACSI helps more than 5.5 million students worldwide connect to Christian education.**

Taylor has been serving in education for more than 30 years and notes he is passionate about training up this generation of disciples for Jesus Christ through Christian education.

Prior to accepting the position of president at ACSI in Colorado Springs, CO, Taylor served 20 years as the head of school at Prestonwood Christian Academy (PCA) in Plano, TX; and for 12 years at The First Academy in Orlando, FL, as a high school

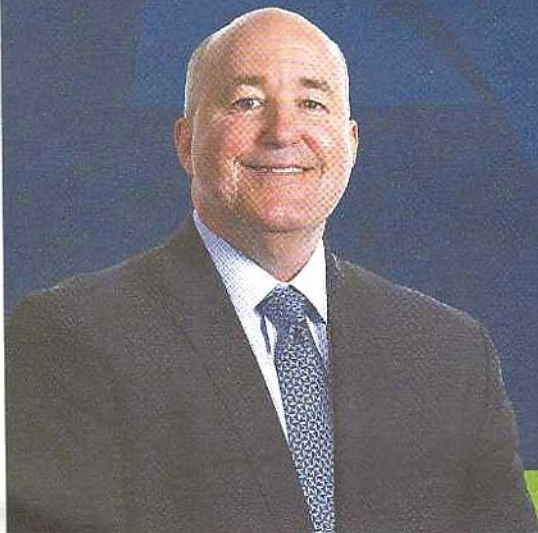
principal and assistant headmaster. He has also held teaching positions within the public school system. Taylor co-launched a national training institute for schools, "Becoming a Kingdom School Institute" and founded the Student Leadership Institute program. He developed a training program for parents titled, "Becoming a Kingdom Family."

Taylor also published the book, "Running With The Horses," aimed at helping parents raise children to be servant-leaders for Christ and helping to build a family plan.

Taylor has served as president of the Texas Private Schools Association (TPSA) board of directors and served on the board of directors for the Association of Christian Schools International (ACSI) and the ACSI Education Foundation prior to accepting the position of president.

Taylor earned his Ph.D. in Philosophy in Leadership Studies from Dallas Baptist University (2009); his master's degree from Nova University (1993) and his Bachelor's degree from University of Central Florida (1986).

He has been married to Delinda Rose Taylor for 34 years and has five sons, Bryce, who graduated from Yale University and Notre Dame Graduate School who is married to Julia; Luke, a graduate of Princeton University and the University of Chicago Booth School of Business, who is married to Ruthie; Zeke, a graduate of Florida State University; Chas, a graduate of Rice University, and currently in law school at the University of Chicago, who is married to Madeline; and an adopted son, DeMarcus, a graduate of Ouachita Baptist University.





**M**ountain Mission School's boys' varsity basketball team finished the 2023-24 season with a 20-7 record, while also earning back-to-back Division 3 national championships in the National Association of Christian Athletes (NACA) tournament and their third championship in a row in the Sportsmen for Christ (SFC) Tournament.

#### 2024 NACA TOURNAMENT

Georgia Force—Sugar Hill, GA	<b>85-62</b>	W
Community Christian—Bradenton, FL	<b>72-60</b>	W

#### CHAMPIONSHIP GAME

Pathways—Orlando, FL	<b>53-47</b>	W
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#### NACA ALL-TOURNAMENT TEAM SELECTIONS

Imani Chacha, Abel Mesfin, and Kaab Dawit

Head Coach Josh Peters noted that as the NACA tournament—the final tournament of the 2023-2024 season—approached, he felt an incredible amount of pressure to send the team's five graduating seniors out on a high note.

"These young men have been extraordinary in character and worked very hard," Peters said. "They have been part of 258 wins for the MMS program over the last eight years. I have had the privilege of coaching them since they were in little league. I'm so very proud of them."

Peters noted the whole team contributed to a great overall season. Eight of the team's members participated in the NACA tournament both years including seniors, Imani Chacha; Kaab Dawit; Abel Mesfin, Mikiyas Wolde and Henok Wondimu; sophomores, Elawi Dawit, Alex Nyakemori and Emanuel Maginga.

Additional teammates in the 2024 NACA

tournament including junior, Cole Corey; sophomores Ezekiel Peters, Ian Rudasunikwa; and freshmen, Yoseph Burusi and Nebu Amedmariam. "Our younger guys have tremendous shoes to fill next year, but they will be ready," Peters said. "We have another great group of boys coming up."

The five starters for the recently ended season included Imani Chacha, senior, who averaged 19 points and five assists per game; Abel Mesfin, senior, who averaged 17 points and four steals per game; Kaab Dawit, senior, who averaged nine points and 10 rebounds per game; Elawi Dawit, sophomore, who averaged 13 points per game; and Alex Nyakemori, sophomore, who averaged seven points and three steals per game.

#### SPORTSMEN FOR CHRIST TOURNAMENT

Appalachian Christian—Abingdon, VA	<b>74-56</b>	W
Jefferson Christian—Ripplemead, VA	<b>69-44</b>	W
Kachea—Kingsport, TN	<b>64-62</b>	W
CEC—Louisville, KY	<b>68-53</b>	W

#### SFC ALL-TOURNAMENT TEAM SELECTIONS

Imani Chacha, Alex Nyakemori, and Kaab Dawit

In addition to Peters as head coach, the MMS team has two assistant coaches, Mike Mosley and Isaac Hood.

"A goal of MMS's athletic program is to represent Christ through all athletic contests," said MMS Athletic Director Mark Hood. "Not only did this group of young men do this well, namely by being awarded the NACA Division III Sportsmanship Trophy, they are to be commended by consistently performing at a high level on the basketball court as a team. I am very proud of who they are and what they have accomplished."



## ALUMNI SPOTLIGHT

# Sissy & Eugene Blackburn

**S**he spent most of her free time with her Spanish speaking friends on the Mountain Mission School campus.

He liked skateboarding, heavy metal music and playing sports. They were complete opposites, according to Sissy Blackburn, yet there was still something about Eugene Blackburn that caught her eye.

"I knew the first time I saw him in 1990 that he would be mine," Sissy says, recalling the day she saw Eugene walking up the hill on the MMS campus. "I just knew. He caught my eye." And she was right. After all, they do say opposites attract. However, it was four years later before they officially met.

"I was a senior and he was a junior when we officially met," Sissy says. "We were both in the choir."

Sissy also played volleyball, basketball, softball and was a cheerleader while at MMS. She also worked on the yearbook staff where she discovered her love of photography – something she carries with her still today.

Eugene spent his time playing basketball and soccer; was a Boy Scout, achieving the

rank of Eagle Scout; and was a member of the MMS Bible Bowl team.

Sissy came to MMS in 1989 from Maryland and graduated in 1994. Eugene was there six years before her, having come to the MMS campus from North Carolina in 1983. He graduated in 1995.

While at Mountain Mission School, they said some of their biggest influences were Patti Hertzog, Mary Hardin, Janice Whitaker, Ernie Hertzog and Cynthia Rodda.

When Sissy graduated, she first went to Southwest Virginia Community College before leaving for Berea College in 1995 to study hotel and restaurant management. Eugene took a different path, heading to Alice Lloyd College to study history.

They kept in touch and in 1997, the couple married and moved to the Greensboro/Winston-Salem area of North Carolina where Eugene found a job working at Lexus detailing cars and Sissy began working for Bank of America. They lived with Eugene's parents for a couple of months before getting their own place.

Years passed and they raised two daughters, Maria, now 23, and Sarah, now 21.

Currently, they reside in the Northern Virginia area where Eugene is chief engineer for Lincoln Properties, where he has been working for the past seven years, taking care of maintenance -- from HVAC, to electricity, to plumbing -- for commercial office buildings.

Sissy says she did not like just staying at home and so she went to work at Cracker Barrel as a waitress.

"I love it there," she says. "I get to see other people and I am a people person."

Having just celebrated their 25th wedding anniversary last year, they both agree the key to happiness in marriage is remaining as best friends. "We do things together," Sissy says. "We vacation all the time with just short vacations."

Looking back on their time at MMS, they

remember different things fondly. Eugene's fondest memories were the summer vacations, the AC camping trips and the incredible time students and staff alike celebrated on Christmas morning. Sissy recalls the Thanksgiving activities and the group from Indiana who came, bringing goodies for students. She also remembers the basketball tournament and spirit week, which she describes as "the best."

However, when they look back on the impact Mountain Mission has had on their lives and continues to have even today, they both readily agree on one thing -- the foundations they built in their lives have a lot to do with the school and the people there.

"We are who we are today because of MMS," Sissy says. "Without them, our lives would have been totally different. They gave us a big, strong backbone and balance. We were truly blessed to be at MMS."



Blessed  
to be at  
MMS



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Summer 2024

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Ninth District Congressman Morgan Griffith visited Mountain Mission School in March while he was in the district for a variety of events. While here, he spoke with MMS squire and knight students, offering insight into how his faith influences his decisions as a government official.

