



St Gabriel's School
EXCELLENCE IN SPECIAL EDUCATION K-12

Gabe's Gazette

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**Nurturing Independence.
Transforming Lives.**



Golfers at Golfing for Gabe's



From the Principal

In 2025, the St Gabriel's community has exhibited a continued commitment to providing excellence in special education. It is my pleasure to present this edition of *Gabe's Gazette*, which celebrates the remarkable learning, contributions and achievements of our students throughout the year.

Our motto, *Nurturing Independence, Transforming Lives*, comes to life in every story featured within this publication. I am so proud to celebrate the individual successes of our students both during and beyond school life, the consistent dedication of our staff, and the immense support of the wider community.

Our Parent Welcome Evening set a warm and positive tone for the year ahead, beginning 2025 with a focus on community relationships. Families joined us for the Walkathon and picnic afternoon, as well as the Mother's, Father's and Grandparents' Morning Teas. The partnership between our School and our families is one of our greatest strengths that is central to the success of each child in their journey at St Gabriel's.

The Athletics Carnival was another successful event. Held at Alfred Henry Whaling Memorial Reserve in Baulkham Hills, the day was filled with enthusiasm as students, and even a few teachers, ran, threw and jumped their way through each event. The strong community participation demonstrated the level of commitment from our parents and carers throughout our annual events.

It has been a privilege to witness our students gaining real-life work experience at our Coffee Van, *Abilities Brew*. Each Friday morning, and at community events such as the Annual Deaf Festival in Homebush, our students take on hospitality roles, serving customers and developing essential workplace skills. This experience forms a valuable part of the Hospitality Program offered to Year 11 and 12 students. This year, a growing number of local businesses have embraced the opportunity to

support our senior students with their work placements. I am so grateful for this real-life immersion that allows students to prepare for their futures beyond their education at St Gabriel's.

Our Work Education Program has also expanded significantly in 2025. Each week, students attend a range of placements and take on responsibilities such as managing our vegetable garden, *Gabe's Harvest*. The produce grown by students is used in our hospitality kitchen and contributes to a host of products including our much-loved St Gabriel's relish. These experiences promote independence and confidence, strengthening students' communication and practical skills.

Our annual Golfing for Gabe's fundraiser was another successful day, assisting us to raise funds for a new outdoor playground for Years K-2. The subsequent Trivia Night, held in our Hall, was an evening of laughter, friendly competition and strong community spirit. Every dollar raised at these events goes directly back to improving school facilities and resources to benefit our students. New playground additions include synthetic grass and shade sails, and we look forward to further playground enhancements in 2026.

The St Gabriel's community is bound by our shared mission to deliver the best possible learning experience for every child. This is only achievable through the strong, ongoing collaboration between families, staff, and the many external therapists and support professionals who work alongside us. Your partnership remains essential and is deeply appreciated.

This year, we also celebrated the launch of our 2026-2028 Strategic Plan, which sets a clear and exciting direction for the next stage of our growth. The plan builds on our areas of strength and introduces new initiatives to expand opportunities for our students. I encourage you to read the road map by [clicking here](#) or by visiting our website: www.stgabriels.nsw.edu.au/strategicplan.

I hope that this edition of *Gabe's Gazette* leaves you with a sense of pride in our students' achievements and our School community. I am confident that we will continue to offer excellence in education both now and in the years ahead.

David Cook
Principal

“The partnership between our School and our families is one of our greatest strengths.”



The Gentle Strength of Ava

Ava starts to count. One, two, three...she'll try to reach 20 seconds, but she never makes it that far before the anaesthetic takes hold and she drifts into a deep sleep, the lights above blurring into soft halos. Her breathing slows. The room fades. She knows this ritual by heart, smoothing the edge of her face mask with ChapStick, tightening the elastic strings around her head with the help of her parents, her eyes gently closing.

"She's been under general anaesthetic 37 times", says Ava's mother, Lina Thomas.

"She's strong-willed...tough...resilient. She knows what to do."

At just 11 years old and in Year 5 at St Gabriel's School, Ava has spent a significant portion of her childhood surrounded by the rhythmic beeping of hospital machines. Her parents recall the countless procedures she has undergone, including a bone marrow transplant at one, hip and knee reconstructions, carpal tunnel surgery, tendon release on her fingers, a craniotomy, and upcoming spinal surgery later this year.

Ava has Hurler's Syndrome, an extremely rare genetic disorder that affects about 1 in 500,000 people and causes gradual damage to bones, tissues and organs. Her parents still remember the aftermath of her craniotomy two years ago, a gruelling nine-hour operation that required a team of surgeons.

"They fused several vertebrae in her neck and had to put a massive halo on her," says her father, Alex Thomas.

For Alex and Lina, the memory of those long hospital days is softened by the unexpected warmth and kindness of their community. They recall how parents at St Gabriel's delivered a basket of gifts to the hospital.

"I just burst into tears," remembers Lina.

"In those moments when you felt so alone in hospital, like the world's just going by, and you're just sitting in this room, wallowing...when I saw this beautiful gift for Ava, I just thought, wow. That's unheard of."

Among the gifts was a handmade teddy bear, complete with its own miniature halo and crafted by a teacher's husband and the Country Women's Association. It is this level of compassion, Ava's parents say, that sets St Gabriel's apart. They liken their daughter's acceptance to the School in Kindergarten to "winning lotto". They say it's a relief to watch Ava grow up in a nurturing, faith-centred environment with teachers who cater to her individual needs.

"Every teacher knows every child by name," says Lina.

"They know their stories, what triggers them, what calms them, what they love. It's such an amazing school."

"They know Ava's tolerance, when she needs to take a break. When she's overwhelmed, they'll take her for a 'flower walk'. Even if it's just picking dandelions, it calms her down immensely."

Before St Gabriel's, life was far more difficult. During her pre-school years, Ava missed out on birthday party invitations, something her mother describes as "absolutely heartbreaking".

"She was a little bit different. She had a nasal gastric tube, bracing and casting on her body...the other children wanted to steer clear of her," says Lina.

Accessibility was yet another battle. The Thomases spent six years pleading the NDIS for a wheelchair after they were initially told it was not "medically necessary", and that a pram would suffice. Later, when Ava underwent surgery to construct her hip sockets, the family received no accessible equipment to aid her recovery at home.

“Every teacher knows every child by name. They know their stories, what calms them, what they love. It's such an amazing school.”

Lina Thomas



“They said she’d never make it past two. We’re so grateful she’s still with us.”

Alex Thomas

“She was in a cast from above her hips to her feet,” recalls Lina.

“We had her over the bath on an ironing board to wash her. We’d told NDIS in advance, but there was no assistance.”

At local schools, accessibility was just as limited. Before Ava’s acceptance to St Gabriels, the family explored everything from mainstream schools in the Hawkesbury, to special needs schools across Sydney. The local primary school, Alex says, could only offer two or three hours per week of one-on-one educational support for Ava and didn’t yet have a wheelchair ramp.

“We need more schools like St Gabriels, especially in rural and regional Australia,” he says.

“Without them, kids like Ava would be treated like children were in the 60s and 70s — institutionalised.”

Raising Ava, he adds, has completely reshaped his understanding of strength and compassion.

“She’s very empathetic,” says Lina.

“If she sees another child crying, she’ll walk over, give them a hug, and tell them not to cry. As hard as it’s been, the good moments are all there.”

Alex nods.

“They said she’d never make it past two,” he says.

“We’re so grateful she’s still with us.”



Finding Voice Through Sound: Music at St Gabriel's School

As a universal language that transcends listeners' abilities, music has a pivotal role in education at St Gabriel's School. For many students with special needs and intellectual disabilities, verbal communication can be difficult to accurately express their thoughts and emotions.

In the absence of spoken language, music provides a more creative outlet for collaborative engagement, learning and introspection. Through rhythm and movement, non-verbal students with autism or sensory processing-difficulties can express emotions of joy, frustration, excitement and curiosity, allowing staff to cater to their individual needs.

Music classes and co-curricular activities at St Gabriel's prioritise group participation. As a special needs education teacher trained in music therapy, I've witnessed the positive impacts of our music programs first-hand. The St Gabriel's Choir gathers every Tuesday at recess to rehearse for upcoming school events, develop musical skills and encourage social connection. It is such a joy to witness students engaging in activities, preparing songs for assembly and producing shared performances. Students can elect to take on a variety of roles. While some are thrilled to perform solos in the spotlight, others prefer to harmonise, keep a steady beat on a drum or tap along to the rhythm. This promotes diverse engagement with both vocal and percussive elements of music.

Our musical programs are essential for the development of

both verbal and motor-skills. Students are free to move and dance, which helps enhance coordination, balance and mobility within a supportive environment. Research indicates that engagement with music can improve cognitive abilities, attention span, memory and the ability to learn and process information. At St Gabriel's, we uphold accessibility in delivering our programs, with a mix of live music created by students for collaborative engagement, as well as pre-recorded tracks for listening and movement-based activities.

I continuously witness the strong emotional impact of music upon students throughout my role. Music is proven to promote a state of calmness and relaxation, reduce anxiety and increase overall wellbeing. It enhances creativity and enriches classrooms, combining learning and fun to encourage students to take on new challenges and build resilience.

By fostering a comfortable environment where students feel safe to express themselves freely, music is essential to a St Gabriel's education, providing a rich, multi-sensory learning experience that I am so proud to deliver to our community.

Soya Thippawal
Music Teacher

“ It is such a joy to witness students engaging in activities, preparing songs for assembly and producing shared performances. ”



Trivia Triumphs!

Our School came alive to the sound of brain cells firing as parents, friends, relatives, sponsors and staff gathered for the 2025 St Gabriel's School Trivia Night.

At this popular sold-out event, almost 230 guests across 23 teams vied for the coveted title of 2025 Trivia Champions with *The Motley Crew* emerging as the champion know-it-alls!

Alongside curly questions, there was the fun of electronic buzzers, marshmallow cricket and paper plane flying. Our teams proved they were not only quick thinkers, but surprisingly competitive cricketers and skilled aviators.

A few lucky participants walked away with fantastic prizes in the Trivia raffle and silent auctions including a 12-month membership to Castle Hill Fitness and Aquatic Centre, a trip for two to Oaks Day at Flemington Racecourse, a \$1,000 David Jones spending spree, and more.

Acknowledging the community's enthusiasm and generosity, Principal David Cook was thrilled with the success of the evening.

"We are absolutely delighted that the 2025 Trivia Night has raised more than any event of its kind in our School's history. Bringing it back onsite made a tremendous difference. Our parents, carers and friends truly feel at home at St Gabriel's. It was a wonderful evening filled with friendly competition, plenty of laughter, and a shared commitment to supporting our students."

Thank you to our sponsors for the evening:

Round Sponsors:

Laing & Simmons Merrylands,
Lexus Parramatta,
Tamburlaine Organic Wines
and Castle Hill RSL Club.

Table Sponsors:

Beyond Care and RMM Group.

“It was a wonderful evening filled with friendly competition, plenty of laughter, and a shared commitment to supporting our students.”



A Celebration of Creativity

For the second time running, the biennial St Gabriel's Art Show proved to be a highlight on the School calendar, providing a wonderful opportunity to recognise and celebrate the creativity, talent and individuality of our students.

Held in the St Gabriel's School Hall, the event showcased a beautiful array of student artwork, with pieces that reflected the unique perspectives and personal expression of each artist.

Principal David Cook said this year's Art Show was a celebration of the diversity and creativity within the St Gabriel's community.

"It was delightful to witness the imagination and originality of our students come to life through their art," Mr Cook said. "At St Gabriel's, creativity is not just about artistic skill, it's about communication, confidence and self-expression. For many of our students, art provides a powerful way to share their thoughts and feelings. The works displayed captured the heart of what makes our School so special."

The exhibition featured a variety of forms, including drawing, painting, photography and sculpture, with each piece telling its own story.

Pearl Dunn (Year 9) was awarded the People's Choice Award for High School for her vibrant and expressive painting. Inspired by artist, Marc Chagall, Pearl used symbolism to convey peace and calmness, creating a dreamlike artwork.

Endre Lin (Year 4) was the proud winner of the People's Choice Award for Primary School. As part of a unit on native Australian birds, Endre's drawing of an emu, captured both the personality and playfulness of one of Australia's most iconic birds.

The 2025 Art Show was not only a celebration of creativity but also a community effort to support future learning opportunities. Thanks to the generosity of our families and visitors, funds raised will go to our Creative Arts Department to support their goal of purchasing a kiln, allowing more of our students' artworks to come to life in the future.

"At St Gabriel's, creativity is not just about artistic skill, it's about communication, confidence and self-expression."



Pearl Dunn


WINNER
of People's
Choice Award
SECONDARY



WINNER
of People's
Choice Award
PRIMARY



Endre Lin



Our New K-2 Playground

One of the many exciting projects undertaken this year was the significant upgrade of our Kindergarten to Year 2 playground.

During the September/October school holidays, the grass and dirt-covered areas were replaced with high-quality synthetic turf, transforming the space into a cleaner, safer and more engaging environment for our students to play, learn and explore throughout the year.

This upgrade has been a key priority for our School, and we are incredibly grateful to our wonderful community for helping bring it to life. It was one of our major fundraising goals for 2025, and the success of a number of community events, including our Trivia Night and Golfing for Gabe's.



Thanks to this shared effort, our youngest learners now have a vibrant, modern and inviting playground that supports both their physical development and imaginative play. It's a space they are already enjoying every day, and one that will benefit students for many years to come.

A Library Designed for Every Learner

Walking into St Gabriel's Library, one is immediately filled with a sense of happiness. Rows of children's books line the shelves, their vibrant covers inviting readers to dive into new adventures. The lively sounds of students interacting, exploring books and engaging with staff, contribute to the welcoming atmosphere that defines this important learning space.

To ensure the educational needs of students who are blind or have low vision are met, St Gabriel's is expanding its Accessible Format Library. Currently, it houses approximately 18 multivolume novels and over 150 readers, picture books and short novels in Braille. Forty one books are published in large print, as well as 15 books with sound elements and 20 with tactile pictures. The collection also includes book boxes containing tactile items from selected stories, and a Yoto player that reads books aloud.

"We have decided to reorganise our entire collection and would eventually like to catalogue all our books", said Kathryn Bowie, Vision Support Teacher.

"We are endeavouring to ensure that all curriculum requirements, such as novels, are available in the formats suitable for individual students."

Current popular titles in accessible formats include *The Thing about Oliver*, *Anne of Green Gables*, *The Black Cockatoo*, *Fantastic Mr. Fox*, *Blabbermouth*, *The Truck Cat*, *Sea Country*, *The Rainbow Serpent* and *Tiddalick*.

"Students need to build literacy skills and to be able to read for pleasure in a format suitable to their needs," added Ms Bowie.

The vast collection of resources allows students to develop their literacy skills through regular, meaningful access to reading materials. Audiobooks are widely available and provide a great opportunity to engage with texts for many students but are less suitable for students with dual sensory loss. Reading Braille provides additional opportunities to practise spelling, decoding and fluency. For this reason, access to a wide range of age-appropriate Braille texts is considered essential.



“Reading Braille provides additional opportunities to practice spelling, decoding and fluency.”

Producing a single Braille book can be a long and expensive process. Sharon Brindle, who works in Vision Support, is heavily involved in producing the books which involves sourcing a PDF version, either online or by contacting the publisher.

"If we can't get a PDF, we have to scan or type the book out ourselves," said Ms Brindle.

The text is then proofread, translated using Braille software, proofread a second time in its Braille form, embossed, collated and finally bound. Materials alone come at a considerable cost.

"A pack of 250 sheets is \$32, and that's only half the size of a regular ream of paper. When novels run to several hundred pages, you can imagine the cost involved," said Ms Brindle

Most books are produced in Grade 2 Braille, which uses contractions, such as a single symbol for 'ing', to reduce bulk and increase reading speed. Books can also be made in Grade 1 for beginner readers. Copyright laws require that the School hold a print copy of every title that is adapted.

While the Accessible Format Library ensures that all students have equal access to mandated curriculum texts, it is also central to student life at St Gabriel's. Accessible books are utilised for National Simultaneous Storytime, Book Week, the St Gabe's Book Club and the personal interests of students.

"It's a privilege to ensure that every student can equally experience the joys of reading," said Ms Bowie.





On Your Marks, Get Set... Fun!

On our final day of Term 3, our School community headed down to Roxborough Park at Baulkham Hills for the annual Athletics Carnival. After last year's cancellation due to torrential rain, everyone was eager to burn off some competitive energy and enjoy a fantastic day out.

There were many exciting events including the championship 100m and 400m races, novelty events, and of course, the ever-spirited House cheers. Gabe's students ran, jumped, threw and cheered their way through a spectacular day of high involvement participation and even higher school spirit. At an assembly in Term 4, Callan was crowned the winning House, with Waterford taking out the Participation Trophy.

A special congratulations to our Kindergarten students, who took part in their very first athletics carnival with great enthusiasm.

Thank you to the helpers from Gilroy Catholic College for their wonderful support on the day!



Reunion Day

Being the first cohort of Year 12 students that have graduated from St Gabriel's School, the Class of 2024 returned for a reunion event on Thursday 18 September.

It was a special occasion, offering our alumni the chance to reconnect with friends and staff, while their families came together to share memories and reflect on their time at St Gabriel's.

What we hope will now become a cherished tradition, each year we will welcome back the most recent Year 12 graduates to celebrate their ongoing connection with our School community.

We look forward to welcoming the Class of 2025 for their reunion on Thursday 10 September 2026.



Class of 2024 and Parents

Stay Connected with St Gabe's

Stay up to date with School news and events by visiting our website and following St Gabriel's on social media.

Contributions to Gabe's Gazette are welcome. If you have a news story about an alumni, please contact the School's Marketing and Fundraising Manager, Allison McNally via email mcnally@stgabriels.nsw.edu.au or phone (02) 9634 2367.



Callym and Kaitlyn's Path to Workplace Independence

At the beginning of Term 4, our Year 11 Hospitality students engaged with local businesses during their week-long Work Placement. Thanks to the coordination of Renee Fenech, Head of Work Education, and Ainslie Allsop, Work Education and Pathways Coordinator, students were welcomed into cafés and canteens across Sydney, gaining hands-on experience and a valuable glimpse into life beyond school.

In the lead-up to their placement, students were prepared by their Hospitality Teacher, Alexandra Nouragas. Through simulated service activities and hands-on practical lessons, Ms Nouragas equipped them with the practical foundations to succeed.

“Work Placement gives our students a chance to shine in real-world settings,” said Ms Nouragas. “We focus on building confidence and practical skills so they can enter these environments feeling prepared. Watching them step into a café or canteen and apply what they’ve learned is incredibly rewarding.”

Callym Woodford showcased dedication and enthusiasm throughout his placement at XS Espresso Kellyville. He spent the week honing service skills by greeting customers, taking orders and assisting with food preparation and delivery.

“I loved meeting all the customers and trying something new that I’ve never done before. I reckon I could do something like that after school,” said Callym.

Manager of XS Espresso at Kellyville Grove, Margaret McArthur, was delighted with Callym’s work ethic and his eagerness to perform tasks.

“Callym was an absolute pleasure to work with. He got along extremely well with all our staff and customers loved him. Having students like Callym on work placement is beneficial to both staff and customers because it encourages inclusiveness and understanding in the workplace and society in general...it teaches patience to the staff. We were constantly amazed by the skill levels of the students we hosted.”

Across Sydney, Kaitlyn Gava completed her placement at The Ark Café at Wetherill Park. She embraced the challenges of hospitality and the week helped her clarify where her passions lie.

Her placement reinforced the value of exploring different pathways, an essential part of experiencing real workplace environments and preparing for independence.

“Opportunities like those that Callym and Kaitlyn experienced reflect the strength of our Work Placement program and the valuable partnerships we have with local businesses,” said Ms Fenech.

“Through these experiences, students continue to grow and discover what they are capable of. Congratulations to all our students who took part in this placement.”

Piecing Together a Bright Future

On most afternoons, the dining table of the Vella family's Cherrybrook home disappears beneath thousands of puzzle pieces. Bent over the organised clutter is Liam Vella, utterly absorbed in piecing together colours and corners, drawing upon his logic and problem-solving skills.

The Class of 2024 graduate is thriving in life after St Gabriel's. His parents, Ray Vella and Janice Ban, marvel at their son's patience, concentration and attention to detail.

"He just loves puzzles," says Janice.

"We have to make sure we break up his day, or else he'd sit there for hours until it's finished, completely lost in it."

She smiles, admiring Liam's contentment with life's simple joys, his daily excitement and growing independence.

His father, Ray, is equally enthusiastic when discussing his son's "likes". He speculates that Liam's fondness for encore episodes of his favourite 90's sitcom, *Everybody Loves Raymond*, and his lifelong fascination with the end credits of films, stems from his appreciation of good humour and television.

In recent years, Ray says, Liam has become more flexible in his routines, less repetitive in his interests and more open to new experiences. He recently competed in backstroke and freestyle races in the Special Olympics and has been learning to play basketball. Seeing him happy and active is a welcome relief after years of watching him struggle with emotional regulation and communication.

Ray likens Liam's perception of the world around him to "watching a foreign movie on SBS."

"Imagine taking away the subtitles and the credits and still trying to understand the conversation," he explains.

"I think that's what it's like for Liam when he tries to communicate what he's feeling."

Liam was diagnosed with autism, ADHD and an intellectual delay when he was two years and nine months old. For the Vella family, the year leading up to that diagnosis was a blur of endless questionnaires, uncertainty and what Janice describes as a surprising lack of empathy from medical professionals.

She remembers the daily "battles" of his early childhood: the constant worry that would cloud her concentration while driving, the panic when he bolted from her care, the exhaustion of managing meltdowns and school refusal at his first primary school.

That fear began to ease when Liam was accepted into St Gabriel's School towards the end of kindergarten.



“Seeing him happy and active is a welcome relief after years of watching him struggle.”
Ray Vella

“We prayed he’d get in,” Janice recalls.

“I was just over the moon when we got the acceptance letter.”

Ray speaks with deep gratitude for Liam’s teachers. Their patience, dedication and understanding, he says, changed everything. There was Mrs Biggs, who recognised his triggers and fostered a calm environment at school; Mrs Power, whose intuitive observation of Liam’s behaviours allowed her to “just click” with him; Miss Moon, who aided his transition into life after Year 12; and Mr Bourne, who introduced him to work experience at Access Industries, a pathway that led to his current role in packing solutions after his graduation.

Ray says that up until Year 9, Liam fluctuated between tolerating school and being overcome with anxious resistance in the lead-up to the morning bell.

His father recalls the year that altered the trajectory of his son’s life.

“I can’t put a finger on it, but it was quite sudden. For the first time, Liam loved going to school. He’d put on his shoes, grab his backpack, and walk straight through the gates. It was the turning point we never expected.”

“He was just so happy,” adds Janice.

“Up until that point, he’d never mentioned anything about school. For the next four years, there were almost no battles, no tears, no excuses.”

“We couldn’t have asked for a better schooling for Liam.”

Liam’s parents say that the transition from St Gabriel’s to life after school was daunting. As his Year 12 graduation approached, they worried how he would cope without the structure and support systems that shaped his life for thirteen years.

But despite their apprehension, Janice and Ray say they were blown away by Liam’s success at work. Between supported employment at Access Industries and Endeavour Work, and workshops at The Avenue Parramatta, his increasing independence has given them hope that he may one day trial assisted living.

“He’s working to his full potential,” says Ray, proud of his son’s journey into adulthood.

“He’s fit, he’s healthy, and super happy. All the fears we had when he was a kid, none of them eventuated.”

At the recent Class of 2024 reunion, Liam reconnected with classmates and teachers at St Gabriel’s. Janice



says that the next day, he woke up and walked into his parents’ room holding his school uniform, keen to put it on again.

This moment, she says, speaks volumes about how far her son has come.

“There is light at the end of the tunnel.”

St Gabriel's Christmas Appeal

Help Us Change Lives

Have you considered donating to St Gabriel's School?

Your support, whether a one-off gift or a regular monthly contribution, can help us continue our mission of providing every child the opportunity to be educated and build independence in a positive and supported learning environment.

Meet Isabella. Isabella is currently in Year 3 at St Gabriel's and is thriving. Her early years, however, came with challenges, including a diagnosis of developmental delay and autism.



To learn more about Isabella, go to: stgabriels.nsw.edu.au/meet-our-students/isabellas-story

Donate before 31 December 2025 by clicking on the QR code.



St Gabriel's School
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Golfing for Gabes

SAVE THE DATE:

Friday 15 May 2026

STONECUTTERS RIDGE GOLF CLUB

