

# Disney Academy: Encouraging Community, Cultivating Global Education, and Inspiring Young Leaders

By: Faye Elmore - *Disney Academy Alumni*  
May 2023



## A NEED, A DREAM, AND A HISTORY TEACHER

Disney Academy is a unique opportunity offered at Corrales International School (CIS).

Lisa Tiger and Sheley Wimmer—CIS faculty and certified “Disney Adults”— started

Disney Academy in 2018 with 3 successful trips to date. They were able to see a need for community involvement among students and brainstormed ways to make that possible. I



was able to interview Lisa Tiger about her journey developing this program. She explained, “*Miss Sheley and I wanted to encourage young people to become more active in their communities and to take a*

*leadership role in serving others. We wanted to include UNM as a feeder program and we were also familiar with the Disney Education Program. So we sat down to see how this would all mesh together. We decided that a trip to Disney would not only give them motivation, but would create a lasting memory and keep them active in serving. The experience could then be translated into UNM’s Innovation Academy,”* And so, Disney Academy was born.

## DISNEY ACADEMY MISSION STATEMENT

The aim of this project is to encourage and enable youth to:

- Participate in a self-directed inquiry within a global context

- Generate creative new insights and develop deeper understandings through in-depth investigation
- Demonstrate the skills, attitudes and knowledge required to complete a project over an extended period of time.
- Communicate effectively in a variety of situations
- Demonstrate responsible action through or as a result of learning
- Appreciate the process of learning and take pride in your accomplishment.

### **PROJECTS WITH PURPOSE**



Once Disney Academy was announced in 2018, students jumped at the opportunity to earn a free trip to DisneyWorld, but would soon learn that their projects meant much more than the reward. The process required and challenged

the candidates to put significant time and energy into their ideas and meet every deadline.

The first year, students had community service projects that included bringing their dogs to elderly homes for animal therapy, starting a Natural Helpers program at our school to support mental health, knitting blankets for babies in the

NICU, donating dog toys and treats to an animal shelter, and more. The second year brought new students and projects such as cooking food for hospice patients and

families, workshop for young girls that was focused on self worth, and collecting clothes and food for





Albuquerque's homeless population. These projects came directly from the minds and hearts of our students and directly impacted their communities in a positive way. Tiffini



Porter from UNM's Innovation Academy said, *"We are continually impressed and inspired by the projects we see from the students in this program. Seeing the entire process the students go*

*through from deciding on a project, to making connections and finally carrying out their vision is so fun for us. The most impressive part I think is seeing the creativity and passion from some of the students. There are projects that we can tell are truly meaningful to the student and being able to witness the completion of the project and see how it impacts the student is actually an honor for us,"*

## **A BUMP IN THE ROAD**

During and after the second Disney Academy trip, something unexpected happened: the big, bad, COVID-19. News of this mysterious new virus was spreading as our students were in one of the most populated attractions in America, and hand sanitizer became our best friend while wandering around Disneyland. March 12, 2020, we returned from California to our principal, Mark Tolley, greeting us at the train station. He told us that it would be best for us to wait to return to school until the



next week. The day after, COVID-19 was declared a global pandemic and we didn't return to in-person school until over a year later.

### **OUR PERSEVERANCE**

Naturally, Covid threw a wrench in our plans of returning to Disney Academy, but Ms.Tiger was determined to continue the program, even if it meant waiting 3 years for it to be safe again. For us, that meant 3 years of fundraising and crossing fingers. Finally, we had a plan to revive the program. With the help of an amazing new staff recruit, Ms.Laurie, Ms.Tiger and the alumni were able to bring it back and better than before. I myself was lucky to go the first time as a freshman before Covid, creating a full circle moment when I was able to go once more my senior year.

### **A COMEBACK TO REMEMBER**

I'd argue that the third Disney Academy trip was the best year yet. There was something about waiting so long for the opportunity to go back that made it that much more worth it. Not only was it a sigh of relief and leap for joy that we were able to bring Disney Academy back, but it was also a time for younger students to join in on the experience. They had seen Ms.Tiger follow through and now knew that it was more than possible to achieve. Along with the possibility of new students joining, the alumni got the chance to see their continued efforts in the community and school be rewarded.

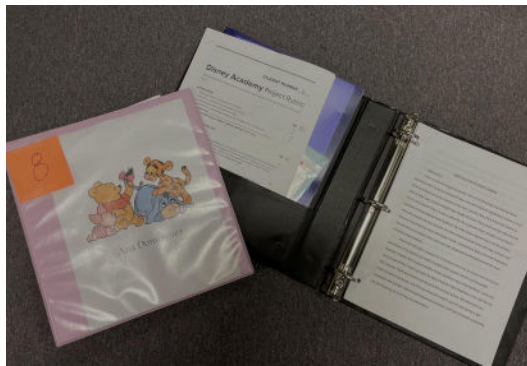


There were seven new awarded projects that emerged in 2023. Some of the projects were starting a pen pal letter system between students here and students in Colombia which

aided in bilingual development and global education, others were creating journals with entry prompts for children in foster care that helped them to express themselves, painting murals for Joy Junction Homeless Shelter, creating activity mats for patients with dementia, and volunteering with equine therapy.

## **THE SELECTION PROCESS**

You might be thinking, how do they choose which projects and students got into Disney Academy? The truth is, most of it is in the hands of the students. Around 40 students begin the process of Disney Academy and we only send 7-10 new students a year. There are 4 different deadlines throughout the semester that must be met in order to continue in



the running. It is the responsibility of the student to complete all the requirements and submit on time, with no guaranteed school time to work on it. The aim is to challenge CIS students to go above and beyond for their community, which is

reflected in their projects and portfolios. Once they have passed each deadline, we send the portfolios—without any names or indications of who the students are— to UNM’s Innovation Academy.

## **UNM INNOVATION ACADEMY**

We were able to partner with Tiffini Porter from the Disney College Program to grade all of the student’s portfolios and select the top students. I interviewed Tiffini about the process of grading and asked if she had any advice to offer to future applicants, she



wrote, *“It seems silly, but the biggest thing we look for in the projects is following ALL the directions. I know your teachers work hard to provide you with specific instructions to help you do your best and if you can’t be bothered to follow those, we don’t think you are a good candidate to travel across the country and participate in a Disney education program. We also pay attention to small details like spelling*

*and grammar. We don’t want to judge students on the scale or impact of their project because we understand that not everyone may have the same opportunities or resources, so we really focus on the things you CAN control and want*

*to see that you are doing your absolute best to make sure those are perfect.”*. After the portfolios are graded and the candidates are selected, CIS hosts a ceremony for the new Disney Academy students where they are recognized for their hard work and awarded this amazing experience.



## **MORE THAN JUST A TRIP**

After the students have completed their projects and received their awards, the next step is the buzzing anticipation of the trip. The time between the ceremony and the departure date is filled with fundraising, meetings, and excitement, but all the underlying stress of the process is eased once the trip arrives. Of course



the traveling itself comes with its own obstacles, but they are all worth it. During the third and most recent trip, we all rented a home together and shared a room with another student, which helped to encourage our bonding. At the house, we were able to cook together, swim together, eat together, play together, and simply be together. Each day we went to a different park in Disney World where we safely explored all of the new settings and sights. Of course the rides, attractions, and food were amazing, however, when surveying Disney



Academy students about their experiences, 100% of them said that their favorite part about Disney Academy was getting closer to their peers and making lifelong memories with lifelong friends. Some students expressed, *“I built like a fun/ family relationship with everyone who went”* and *“My biggest takeaway is the people I met, and how much of an impact we make on each other”*. That was part of the goal. This trip was an opportunity to truly get to know people that you otherwise would just pass in the halls. I saw students go out of their comfort zones with these encounters, talking to others that were different



from them and creating bonds. Regardless of age, race, religion, interests, we were all brought together during Disney Academy. This last trip was also extra special for the five seniors that went. It acted as a beautiful and fun send off to us and Ms. Tiger made sure to go out of her way to honor us by hosting a mini Disney graduation ceremony complete with Mickey ears.



*“The biggest positive takeaway I've gotten from Disney is forming a community and being there for others. Disney Academy is a group of bright students hoping to change the world, the reward sure is nice, but what's even better is the service that all of us have completed. I also loved getting to live with these kind and generous people for a week and just having fun together. It's a life changing program and I will forever be grateful that I was able to be a part of it for so long.” - Jack Barkhurst, 3 time Disney Academy Student*



## **ALWAYS LEARNING**



One of the most integral parts of Disney Academy is the classes we take at the parks. The Disney Imagination Campus partners with CIS to provide classes that focus on leadership, business and branding, as well as extra fun ones like theme park design. During the classes, we are guided by Disney cast members through the parks, where they teach us fun behind the

scenes facts, lead social activities, and give us independence with some mini projects. In the third year, Ms.Tiger and Ms.Laurie developed their own activity to incorporate into Disney Academy. Our third day in the parks was at Epcot, which features 11 pavilions themed after different countries around the globe. Ms.Tiger and



Ms.Laurie challenged us to take photos capturing similarities among different cultures. This helped us ponder what unites us rather than what divides us and promoted our global education in a safe environment.

## **FUTURE OPPORTUNITIES**

So as we've learned, Disney Academy is an amazing program for students looking to serve their communities, get out of their comfort zones, meet new friends, and be a part of something bigger than themselves. We hope that what we learn during Disney Academy can be carried out throughout our futures, even after we leave CIS. One way that Ms.Tiger and Tiffini Porter have worked to ensure our continued education and love for Disney is through UNM's Innovation Academy. Tiffini works with them in their Disney College Program, which helps college students to expand their knowledge and careers at Disney World. Each semester, UNM sends a few accepted applicants to



live and work in the parks, all while receiving up to 12 college credits. Disney Academy is a way to get your foot in the door and connect with people like Tiffini who can help make that dream come true. Even one of our own CIS Alumni, Keely Santillan was able to be a part of their program.

## **HOW TO GET INVOLVED**

Now that you're itching to know more about this experience, what's the next step? Any CIS student in grades 8-12 can begin the process of acceptance for Disney Academy. The final deadline before submission is usually around November of every school year so you have the summer before and most of the first semester to work on your project. It must be focused on something you are passionate about and that must reflect in your work. We have high standards for our students and put emphasis on maintaining good behavior and academic standing at CIS. We look for good role models in our school community and students that are truly dedicated to their service. On top of that, each deadline must be met for consideration. Ms. Tiger hosts a Disney Academy informational meeting at the beginning of each school year to aid new students and is always ready to answer questions.

Disney Academy is truly one of the most cherished memories of my life, and a program I will forever endorse. Take it from a graduating Disney Academy student, give it a shot and give it your all, you will not regret it.

