

Noorthoek Academy's Story: Serving Adults with Intellectual Disabilities

By Lyn VanTol, Executive Director



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Noorthoek's Story

Noorthoek Academy was founded in 1989 to fill a gap in the community for special education after high school. Co-founder Elizabeth Crouch stated, "When our daughter, Katy, was graduating in 1989 from what was then Kent Occupational High School, she wanted very much to 'go to college.' After looking into what was available in the community, we quickly found that there were no viable options. With the help of a number of special educational professionals, including the late Joe Noorthoek, we (a group of parents) created a partnership program with Grand Rapids Community College (GRCC) to address these needs." Noorthoek Academy, born from the vision of a group of parents with the partnership of special education professionals and a community college, became a college within a college providing a life-long education in a college setting for individuals with cognitive/learning challenges.

As it grew, Noorthoek Academy provided several sections (different days and times) of a college-like course that was taught by Noorthoek's Instructor. The course that was taught changed each semester and was chosen to help the students better understand the resources

available in the community where they live, to better understand the world around them, or to better understand current events. For example, course topics have included Recycling with a field trip to Kent County’s state of the art recycling center, The Olympics taught during an olympic year, and Extreme Environments to help better understand climate changes. Noorthoek Academy has published an annual anthology of poetry written by the students. The latest edition of the Elizabeth and Katherine Couch Poetry Blog can be found at <https://www.noorthoekacademy.org/students/student-poetry/>

For 33 years now, Noorthoek Academy has been on a steady path of expansion, serving an increasing number of students with additional class offerings. The enrollment of Noorthoek is 90+ students. During the pandemic Noorthoek switched to Zoom classes with the help of GRCC. The supportive partnership with GRCC has been noteworthy and crucial to Noorthoek Academy’s success. For example, GRCC has provided Noorthoek with the donated support of classroom space and, during the pandemic, free access to Chromebooks for virtual classes. “Zooming” into class is now preferred by some of our students and has allowed Noorthoek to serve students that move out of state. Additionally, Noorthoek students are recognized for the number of years they attend and once they have attended Noorthoek for 20 years, GRCC awards that student with an honorary degree during the GRCC formal commencement exercises that year. Dr. Bill Pink, the current President of GRCC, has stated on many occasions that the community of GRCC has also benefited greatly by the presence of Noorthoek Academy students because inclusive, full participation of everyone in the community strengthens the values of diversity and equality and the social fabric that forms the very community itself.

As a well-established national model, the Academy has been recognized for its excellence by The Joseph P. Kennedy and the W. K. Kellogg Foundations and enjoys very strong support from a number of foundations, companies and organizations, and individuals ([Noorthoek Academy](#)).

Mission and Vision

Mission: Noorthoek Academy provides an affordable college experience, offering continuing education and inclusion experiences in the arts and sciences for adults with intellectual disabilities. We are dedicated to creating life-long learning and inclusion opportunities to enrich people's lives.

Purpose: The Academy is designed for students who want to expand their knowledge and enrich their lives by learning more about the world around them. We provide many opportunities for self-expression and development of creative talents. We explore the natural sciences and liberal arts while learning about other countries and cultures using a dynamic, hands-on approach. Being on a college campus and integrating into the mainstream, students have the opportunity to increase their self-confidence and independence while making friends in an atmosphere of mutual respect and encouragement.

Who We Serve: We serve students who have successfully completed four years of high school from Kent, Ottawa, and surrounding counties. The curriculum is tailored to the needs of the educable mentally impaired student or those with comparable abilities. The successful student is motivated to learn, displays socially acceptable behavior, and is able to read and write (with exceptions for visual impairments). ([Noorthoek Academy](#)).

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