



## JOIN US FOR FAMILY VISIT DAYS 2025–2026

### *Kindergarten Open House*

Monday, September 22

Tuesday, October 14

Tuesday, October 28

### *Middle and High School*

Friday, October 24

Tuesday, November 4

Friday, December 5

Tuesday, January 20

Friday, February 20

Thursday, March 12

Thursday, April 16

## INTERESTED IN EMS?

Complete an inquiry form for  
your first step!

Mid-year: Limited openings  
available for transfers



2026-27:  
Begin exploring  
EMS this fall

Scan the QR code  
to start your  
journey at EMS!



## *Our Stories:* **The Journey from the Middle**

Hindsight is 20/20 and often our position when recounting a tale, truth, or impactful life happening. Hindsight allows our story to spin with everything turning out “well in the end.” There’s a certain comfort knowing that good ultimately triumphs and we emerge victorious.

Truth be told, much of life is spent in the midst of our journeys. When we interview alumni at homecoming about their experiences and honor their narratives, we typically highlight their successes, accolades, and achievements. But their true success lies in who they are, choices made in the middle, and who they are becoming, much like what we teach here at EMS!

The three EMS alumni stories in this issue have much to be proud

of; they excel in their respective fields, garner respect from their peers, and hold significant positions. Yet, the most noteworthy aspect of their stories may be the struggles they’ve faced and what they did next. In their resilience, they find hope and joy, even amid challenges and painful transitions. Read the highlights summarized by Abigail Cook’s interviews with Rolando Santiago, Wendy Hochstedler, and Everett Brubaker. They shared their stories as they are—navigating the middle—and now, more than ever, it’s essential to highlight their resilience and determination in the face of very real challenges that inspire living on. Because life, after all, is a journey.

Warmly,  
Paul Leaman

# CELEBRATING ALUMNI STORIES

We celebrate alumni stories to hear each others' journeys since high school and to be inspired through lives of service, professional contributions, embodiment of the love of Jesus, and community engagement. Nominations are accepted in the spring of each year and reviewed by the selection committee of the EMS Alumni Board. The EMS learning community and alumni celebrate the stories over fall Homecoming.

*Learn more at [easternmennonite.org/alumni/alumni-awards/](https://easternmennonite.org/alumni/alumni-awards/)*



## A Radiant Presence

### Wendy Wenger '95 Hochstedler

Wendy's megawatt smile and genuine presence light up any room she enters. Her ability to make others feel seen and valued is a testament to her authenticity. Honest, hopeful, and sincere, Wendy shares life's anecdotes with warmth and clarity. While memories from high school may blur over time, her steadiness and genuine spirit have remained constants, guiding her journey into forestry and farming, and her care of family and enduring legacy at EMS and beyond.

#### **Rooted in Heritage, Growing with Purpose**

Wendy, alongside her husband Mark, both graduates of EMS's Class of 1995, operate Wenger Grapes in Waynesboro, Virginia. This family farm and her family's attendance of EMS are rooted in tradition. Both grandparents and her parents also attended EMS. Wenger Grapes



specializes in growing Concord and Niagara grapes and has been in Wendy's family since 1938. Under Wendy and Mark's stewardship, the farm has evolved with a renewed focus on environmental responsibility. Their "pick-your-own" grape experience not only supports local agriculture but also a connection between the community, their food, and the land.

#### **The Seeds of Environmental Stewardship**

Wendy's passion for the environment was germinated as a little kid growing up on a farm, and with lots of family camping trips, and enhanced during her time at EMS, particularly through her active involvement in science classes with teacher Dave Mumaw '58 and a transformative composting research project. These experiences sowed the seeds for her lifelong commitment to sustainable practices.

Following high school, Wendy went to College and joined Mennonite Voluntary Service in Topeka, Kansas, where she contributed significantly to the Kansas Rural Center. This organization champions sustainable agriculture, supporting small farmers. Wendy's role aligned seamlessly with her gifts of connection and presence, as she walked along other farmers to bring eco friendly methods to their farming practices.

#### **A Forester's Multifaceted Journey**

Like many family farmers, farming is not Wendy's only job. Beyond the vineyards, Wendy serves as a Forester for the Shenandoah region. Her participation in wildland firefighting training equips both herself and her colleagues with critical skills to manage and contain wildfires—which is vital in the Shenandoah Valley and surrounding areas.



Photos courtesy of Wendy Hochstedler



# Life-Changing Year at Eastern Mennonite School

## A Leap into a New World



At just 17, Rolando Santiago took a courageous step, leaving his Spanish-speaking home in Puerto Rico to immerse himself in the English-speaking environment of Eastern Mennonite School in Harrisonburg Virginia. Drawn by his Mennonite heritage and a desire to prepare for college in the U.S., Rolando found friendship and belonging amidst growth at EMHS in his senior year. Reflecting on his experience, he recalls, “I was warmly welcomed at EMHS, and I cherished my experience there.” This supportive environment became the foundation for a year rich in exploration and personal growth.

### Harmony and Exploration

Music became a cornerstone of Rolando’s EMS experience. As a member of the Touring Choir, his voice resonated beyond the school’s walls, even contributing to the recording of an album—a memory he recalls with a smile. His passion for music was further nurtured through voice lessons with Mr. Marvin Miller, instilling a love for harmony that continues to enrich his life today.



### Guided by Mentors

The influence of educators Jim Rush and Harvey Yoder was pivotal in shaping Rolando’s outlook on the world. Mr. Rush’s engaging projects ignited Rolando’s interest in government and social issues, engaging in serious conversation about the pressing issues of the day, including the draft. Mr. Yoder’s course on emergent issues provided invaluable insights into church and community building—a theme that would become central to Rolando’s professional and personal endeavors.

### From Education to Professional Life

Rolando L. Santiago, PhD, retired in 2024 after a distinguished career in both church and public service organizations at local, state, and national levels. His most recent role was as Chief of Behavioral Health and Crisis Services in Montgomery County, MD, where he led a team of 260 professionals, serving over 12,000 individuals annually with a \$61 million budget.



Spanning fourteen years in public behavioral health services, including seven years with the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Rolando’s work focused on evaluating programs supporting children and adolescents with serious emotional disorders. He also dedicated twenty years to faith-based Anabaptist Mennonite organizations, notably serving as Executive Director of Mennonite Central Committee U.S. for six of those years.

Rolando has served on health and human service boards globally and lectured at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health for two decades. His academic achievements include earning a PhD in educational psychology and statistics from the University at Albany, State University of New York.



### A Life Rooted in Faith and Service

Rolando is an active member of Neffsville Mennonite Church, where he leads the missions committee, sings in the choir, and teaches adult Sunday School. Alongside his wife of 43 years, Raquel Trinidad, he cherishes time with their two children and five grandchildren. His passions include caring for his 93-year-old mother, running, gardening, and contributing to writing projects on the Mennonite experience in Puerto Rico.

Rolando Santiago’s story is evidence that EMS - a place where faith, community, and learning intertwine - shapes lives of purpose and service. As we celebrate his journey then and now, we are reminded of the enduring influence of education in the Eastern Mennonite tradition and the transformative power of a single year dedicated to growth and discovery and the bravery it took to venture into the unknown and beyond.

Photos courtesy of Rolando Santiago

# Discovering Belonging and Passion:

## Honoring Everett Brubaker '10

Everett Brubaker's journey has been marked by personal growth, community involvement, and a deep commitment to environmental sustainability. From his early days at Eastern Mennonite School (EMS) to his current role in driving social and environmental change, Everett's story is about the power of calling and the pursuit of passion.

### Finding a New Beginning at EMS

Everett's journey with EMS began in 7th grade, following a move from Arizona to Harrisonburg in 2004. The transition was significant, he found himself in a new environment, surrounded by unfamiliar faces and a faith culture he had never encountered. His father's job at Eastern Mennonite University prompted the family's relocation, and Everett's family was in search of a nurturing educational environment for him and his brother.

Reflecting on his initial days, Everett shared, "I didn't have any friendships going in, and wasn't exactly sure what a Mennonite was. I was nervous, yet excited to start a new chapter." It was a leap into the unknown, but one that would shape his future in profound ways.

### Passions Ignited Through Music and Creativity

EMS's "Big Brother" program provided immediate connections, helping to ease the transition. "Walking into the chapel and seeing my big brothers waving to me was a relief," he recalled. One aspect of chapel, music, became a significant part of his life, as he learned to sing and read music—skills that helped him understand himself better.



Everett also found joy in creative projects, such as making movies with friends. For a literature class project, Everett recounted filming a take on Robin Hood with friends. "Instead of spending a few hours to write a paper for extra credit, we sunk well over 100 hours on making a film and cementing lifelong memories. Absolutely worth it." He also started a band in eighth grade with fellow classmates Logan, Phil, Ashton, all 2010 graduates, called Prevail. They even recorded and produced an EP and played EMS talent shows. These experiences embedded a love for storytelling and collaboration, skills he would carry with him into adulthood.

### A Call to Environmental Stewardship

One of the most transformative experiences for Everett at EMS was a trip with The Chesapeake Bay Foundation, which sparked a passion in him for environmental sustainability. Led by his future father-in-law, Mr. Blosser, the trip opened Everett's eyes to the interplay between humans and the environment.

"The power of experiential learning was immense," Everett explained. "Seeing people work passionately, covered in mud, and understanding our interconnectedness within our ecosystem was a revelation." This journey ignited a lifelong commitment to environmental advocacy, emphasizing the importance of experiential learning and community engagement.

### Bringing People Together for a Thriving Future

Today, Everett finds joy in bringing communities together. He has kick-started a community garden, worked to make homes in need more energy efficient, and on Earth Day this year organized a large gathering of local environmental leaders. His focus is on making connections that enable both people and the planet to thrive.

After a recent job loss due to federal budget cuts, Everett's entrepreneurial spirit led him to



propose a new role at the emerging local nonprofit Renew Rocktown, where he now serves as Director of Development. His work involves scaling up the organization's efforts to build local capacity for sustainable change.

In the wake of a heartbreaking setback losing a job he loved that was fulfilling and making a difference, he was able to find resilience and adaptability in the face of adversity.

*"The power of experiential learning was immense. Seeing people work passionately, covered in mud, and understanding our interconnectedness within our ecosystem was a revelation."*

### Words of Wisdom for the Next Generation

Reflecting now, Everett emphasizes the importance of belonging at that critical time when he joined EMS. "When a child feels they belong, everything else—academics, sports, engagement—improve," he said. He credits EMS with providing a sense of belonging that has anchored his friendships and character development. He hopes that EMS will lean into an expansion of creating a sense of belonging for all students.

Everett's story is one of resilience, passion, and the transformative power of community. As he continues to lead initiatives for environmental and social equity, his journey serves as an inspiration for others to find their place, pursue their passions, and create meaningful change, no matter the circumstances.



# What inspires you?

*Building on the flame you lit last year*

## SUPPORT OUR OVERALL VISION AND MISSION:

Encourage our entire K-12 Learning Community!  
Unrestricted gift put to work where needed most

### STUDENTS

expand access to  
holistic learning

### EDUCATORS

encourage excellence

### CAMPUS

enhance spaces to belong

### CORE VALUES

build a better world

## Creating a Culture of Generosity

### Q&A: Why do you give?

"My daughter benefited from financial aid and so I want to give back as much as I can so other students can benefit like our family did. Recurring giving makes this easy for my gifts to add up each year."

Anne Bartee, Richmond, VA

Select YOUR ways to give this year.  
Help strengthen the Flames Fund!

2025-2026 Goal:  
\$585,000

#### Anchoring Lights:

Faithful monthly giving so every student can shine.  
Monthly gifts, big or small, create lasting impact.  
Together, Anchoring Lights donors make a difference

#### Student-lead Christmas Fund Drive:

This tradition of 78 years will launch on Giving Tuesday,  
followed by student invitations to give!

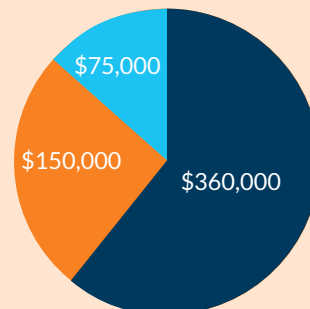
#### VDOE Tax Credit Gifts:

Virginia's Education Improvement Scholarship Tax  
Credit Program provides direct aid for eligible students  
and benefits the donor with a 65% state tax credit.

#### Planned Giving:

As a 501c3, EMS accepts planned gifts such as Qualified  
Charitable Distributions; stock, real estate or other  
assets; and gifts through wills.

Learn more at [easternmennonite.org/flames-fund](https://easternmennonite.org/flames-fund)



■ VDOE Tax Credit Gifts  
■ Christmas Fund Drive  
■ Other Contributions

## 2025-2026 GOVERNING BOARD OF DIRECTORS

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In admissions processes, Eastern  
Mennonite School does not  
discriminate on the basis of any race,  
color, handicap, national or ethnic  
origin, or religion, and admits students  
to all rights, privileges, programs and  
activities generally accorded or made  
available to students at the school.

The following person has been  
designated to handle inquiries  
regarding the school's non-  
discrimination policies, including  
its Title IX policy: Debbie Katz, high  
school counselor, 540-236-6022. For  
assistance related to Title IX or other  
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## VISION

Eastern Mennonite School aspires to embody the love of Jesus as a learning community where every student belongs, thrives, and joins God's work in the world.

## MISSION

Eastern Mennonite School, with home and church, invites students to faith in Jesus Christ, academic excellence, personal integrity, and compassionate service.

## STAY CONNECTED!

If you don't already receive our monthly Flames Report, go to [easternmennonite.org/news](http://easternmennonite.org/news) to sign up for e-news.

## FOLLOW US:



# Come to Connect HOMECOMING 2025

**Saturday, October 18, 10 AM**

*EMS Soccer Fields*

This run/walk is family friendly and open to ALL EMS Community, fans, and friends.

Funds raised benefit our EMES PTF fund

*Registration Fee is \$15, includes branded white t-shirt*

[easternmennonite.org/homecoming](http://easternmennonite.org/homecoming).

\*The color powder is a corn starch base with zero artificial dye and is environmentally friendly.

### **Friday:**

chapel, picnic, and homecoming concert

### **Saturday:**

breakfast, alumni stories, color run, volleyball, soccer, and building tours

### **All weekend:**

reunions for classes ending in 5 and 0

*Register at the link below to help us prepare!*

[easternmennonite.org/homecoming](http://easternmennonite.org/homecoming)



[easternmennonite.org](http://easternmennonite.org)