

# Alive

MARIANIST CULTURE, FAITH AND COMMUNITY

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*Creating Sacred Spaces: Marianist Brother Tom Suda*





# Developing People of Character

*St. Mary's University Receives  
National Recognition for Its Service and  
Leadership Programs.*

BY SHELLY REESE

**B**RIGHT AND ARTICULATE, GREG PARDO III sums up his four years at St. Mary's University in two words: "life altering."

"My old high school teachers were afraid I wouldn't grow because I was going to St. Mary's and staying in the neighborhood where I grew up — because I wasn't leaving my comfort zone. Now they see me and say, 'You've changed. You've really grown.'"

The first child in his Mexican-American family to attend college, Pardo, 22, entered St. Mary's with the idea that you go to college "so you can get the degree that will let you go out and make big bucks." He enrolled as a business major. But something happened over the ensuing four years.

Pardo dropped his business major and began studying political science and international relations. He swapped his work-study job at the library for service work that entailed starting a tutoring program at his old high school, which is next door to St. Mary's. He traveled on extended service trips to Mexico and India with Marianist leaders and professors.

When he graduates in December, Pardo won't make the "big bucks." Instead, he'll spend the next two years working with the Marianist Volunteer Program, most likely serving the poor in Mexico.

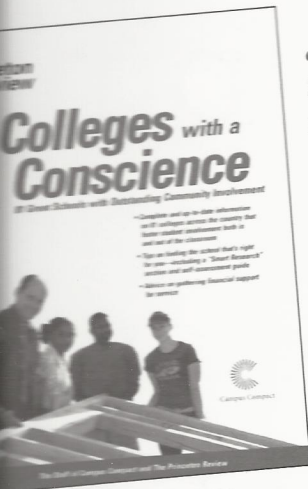
"A few years ago I would never have thought about that," says Pardo. "My experience here has changed me tremendously, and I can't describe it because I'm still trying to figure it out. One of my philosophy professors said, 'There's a difference between making a living and making a life.' Being here has helped me understand that. I've discovered a new sense of purpose."

*Greg Pardo III, a senior at St. Mary's University, volunteers his time setting up housing for participants in the Marianist Volunteer Program.*









Garcia, a student at St. Mary's, assists with childcare at the Home, a home for homeless women and children.

Pardo's attitude is indicative of the way many students at St. Mary's perceive Catholic social teaching and the Marianist charism and incorporate it into their lives. At St. Mary's, a liberal arts school with just over 2,500 undergraduates, service isn't a feel-good extracurricular or a fraternity requirement. It's one of the university's core values and an integral part of the learning experience.

That commitment, and the myriad of ways in which the 153-year-old university lives up to it, explains why the school was included in the 2005 edition of The Princeton Review's *Colleges with a Conscience*, a new publication highlighting "81 great schools with outstanding community involvement."

## LEARNING THROUGH SERVICE

The idea behind service learning at St. Mary's is to bring Catholic social teaching to life by incorporating ways to serve into the classroom. The university's Service Learning Center, founded in 1994, lets students incorporate community work into their academic, work-study and extracurricular lives.

"There's a spirit alive in the minds and hearts of college students today that tells me that they 'get it.' They have a sense of compassion for the downtrodden and the marginalized," says Marianist Father Cris Janson, who has written a book about St. Mary's Service Learning Center.

The Service Learning Center cultivates that spirit and helps students find ways to put it into practice. On the academic side, the center helps instructors incorporate service into their course work. With service learning, students see classroom



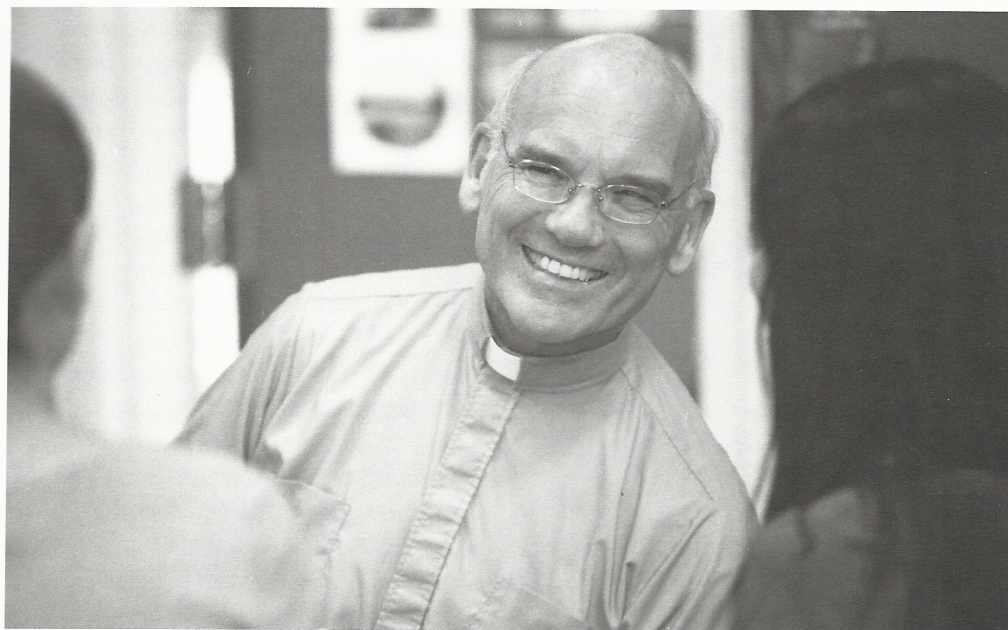


lessons at work in the real world. But service learning delves deeper than an internship because it incorporates an element of reflection. Students are challenged not only to serve and to learn through service, but to uncover the meaning behind service.

"Students don't earn credit for service, they earn credit for learning," says Service Learning Center Director Andy Hill, a St. Mary's alumnus and lay Marianist. The distinction is an important one.

work is followed by a reflection stage that challenges students to learn from their experience. Some professors have students write a paper about their experience. Others develop a series of questions for students to reflect upon. One professor asks them to express the meaning of their work in an art project.

Service learning has become an important component of many students' work lives as well. Between 15 and 20 percent of St. Mary's students partici-



*Marianist Father Cris Janson*

Service learning isn't about hours of community involvement. It's about hours of community involvement that result in spiritual, academic and personal growth. A student working in a homeless shelter isn't there merely to serve food or sort clothing. She's there to try to better understand the root causes of homelessness, to understand her own obligations as a servant leader and, hopefully, to develop a resolve that will produce long-term solutions.

Each semester more than 300 St. Mary's students enroll in more than a dozen courses that include a community-based service learning component.

Although the Service Learning Center helps instructors connect with nonprofits and civic organizations and provides transportation for the students, professors are responsible for integrating the experience into their curriculum. The service

pating in work-study fulfill their work requirements by performing service work off campus. The goal, Hill says, is to place students in positions that will enhance and bring a new level of meaning to their academic experience. For example, a student interested in attending law school might be placed in the attorney general's office or with the Mexican American Legal Defense Fund.

#### **AN IDEA WHOSE TIME HAS COME**

The Service Learning Center at St. Mary's celebrated its 10-year anniversary last year, and today many colleges and universities have well-developed programs. St. Mary's participates in an intercollegiate consortium of colleges in the San Antonio area which all have service learning programs.

A recent survey by Campus Compact, which co-authored the *Colleges with a Conscience* book with the Princeton



Review, found that of its 950-member institutions, 98 percent of respondents include service learning as part of their curriculum, and the average number of faculty members using service learning per campus increased from 14 in 1999 to 40 in 2004. What's more, 92 percent have an office dedicated to coordinating service and civic engagement activities. Student involvement is likewise on the rise. In 1999 only about 10 percent of students participated in service. Today that number hovers around 30 percent.

"The impetus has to come from both directions," says Karen Partridge, a spokeswoman for Campus Compact, which



...director of  
Service Learning  
conducts  
site visit at  
Puerto Rico.

promotes building civic engagement into academic and campus life. "The students have to look for these opportunities and the schools have to provide the support and resources to make them happen."

Amidst all the programs, however, service learning at St. Mary's is unique, says Hill, because it is infused with the Marianist charism. "Other universities do a great job with service learning, but it's different than what we do. Our program isn't just about the secular aspects of service — such as building infrastructure and determining the needs of the community. In the reflection stage we talk about the fundamental dignity of every person. We provide the Catholic social teaching context and a sense of the Marianist history and heritage."

## CELEBRATING A HERITAGE

Service is so deeply infused in the Marianist heritage that the university's campus day of service is fittingly called "Continuing the Heritage Day."

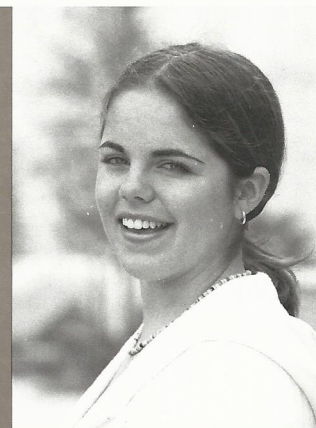
Staci Gangnon, a 19-year-old sophomore from Milwaukee, was one of the lead organizers of this year's Continuing the Heritage Day, which focused on helping with Hurricane Katrina relief. She calls the event "a foundation to help students identify the mission of the university."

"Our society is very individualistic," says Gangnon. "We must bring people together to not only think, but to act. We need to see the face of God in the people around us. Service is a great way to do that because you interact with people that you wouldn't ordinarily, and in those faces you see Christ."

For many students, particularly incoming freshman, Heritage Day is an introduction to the rewards of service. The experience encourages many to become involved in longer-term projects or to participate in immersion trips in which students work on projects in impoverished communities.

"Our students don't go into a community and say, 'We'll paint a church because that's where we see the need,'" says Larry Hufford, Ph.D., a professor of international relations who has led several immersion trips. "The people of the community designate the projects. That's another important lesson in leadership for our students: listening to people at the grassroots level."

Over the years students have visited war-ravaged countries such as Nicaragua and El Salvador and impoverished nations such as Haiti, Mexico, India and Bangladesh. St. Mary's students, most of whom are Hispanic, also have participated in trips to Appalachia, East St. Louis, Ill., and Native American communities where they experience different cultures within the United States.



"We need to see the face of God in the people around us. Service is a great way to do that because you interact with people that you wouldn't ordinarily, and in those faces you see Christ."

Staci Gangnon, sophomore,  
St. Mary's University





St. Mary's University

## DEVELOPING LEADERS

St. Mary's isn't just about cultivating a desire to serve: It's about developing servant leaders.

At freshman convocation, every incoming student is asked to take a pledge to learn about servant leadership. To help them, St. Mary's offers two venues for leadership development.

The Marianist Leadership Program is part of the Service Learning Center. Each year 15 freshmen applicants are selected to "explore the areas of faith and culture, leadership and service, within the university and civic communities" in hopes of fostering a lifelong commitment to integrating faith and service into their lives. Students receive a \$3,000 annual grant from the Marianist Trust, complete a virtual course in the Marianist tradition, attend weekly meetings to plan and reflect on their service experiences and spearhead Continuing the Heritage Day.

Across campus, a university program called the 21st Century Leadership Center cultivates leadership and community-organization skills. St. Mary's graduates have a long history as leaders in San Antonio and South Texas, explains Andy Hernandez, executive director of the 21st Century Leadership Center. "We decided we weren't going to create leadership serendipitously but intentionally," explains Hernandez, who helps professors infuse their courses with servant-leadership themes.

"We want every student to graduate with core leadership skills. We took our vision straight from the Marianist educational goals and asked a simple question: What kind of citizen leaders should a Marianist institution be building?"

Students learn about collaboration and team building, but they're also encouraged to explore the purpose and moral obligations of leadership in light of their faith. "We're not just in the business of creating effective leaders," says Hernandez. "We're in the business of creating meaningful leaders."

Each year hundreds of students and

thousands of people throughout the community participate in 21st Century Leadership activities. Last year about 250 students participated in the Leader-to-Leader luncheon series, in which community leaders share their thoughts on leadership with small groups of students. St. Mary's students, working through the center, sponsor an annual "Liberation Through Education" conference in which hundreds of underprivileged high school students develop their leadership skills and learn ways to improve their communities.



## PART OF THE SOLUTION

For those involved with service learning at St. Mary's, the impact of these programs holds great promise. "For me as a professor, the telling moment is at commencement when I see a student I taught walk across the stage," says Hufford. "That's when I have to ask myself, 'Is he or she going to be part of the solution or part of the problem?' If they are not going to be part of the solution, then I'm not doing my part as a faculty member here."

*Brother Arnold Wurzel waits as Nicole Canales, a student at St. Mary's, prepares to take him for a walk.*

*Shelly Reese is a freelance writer living in Cincinnati.*

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