

Lasallian Memories of Cumberland

106 years. For over a century, Cumberland has been home to a small core of men who were part of the backbone of local Catholic education. Perhaps you have met them, or perhaps not. But they have been your good neighbors, educating the young men (and since 1966, young women) who enrolled in Cumberland's Catholic schools.

106 years. These men have watched a mountain town of the 1910s and 1920s evolve into a significant industrial center of the World War II years and beyond. But when national and international factors—too numerous to mention here—dictated the need to shift from smokestacks to a more diversified economy, Cumberland had no choice but to adjust. Through all of the relatively recent changes, some of them painful, these men remained in their school, teaching lessons and touching the hearts of so many of Cumberland's future community leaders.

106 years. For decades, these men wore long black robes in their daily teaching tasks. The winds of change of the mid-1960s allowed them, if they so desired, to wear black suits or—for a few who so opted—regular business suits. But they were professionally dressed at all times, proud to be the religious educators they were called to be, and quite willing to call Cumberland “home” when their assignment brought them to Mountain Maryland. Throughout this time, several hundred of these men would remember their Cumberland years, almost always, with fondness whenever they recalled their tours of duty.

106 years. True, the name of the school which these men conducted evolved with the years. For two short years these men taught youngsters at the original St. Patrick's School (1851-1853), back in the day when Cumberland held so much promise because of the intermountain roads, the railroad, and the canal. They would return in 1907 to open La Salle Institute, where the young men in both its high school department and in the upper elementary grades received the best of their preparations. Then, when the younger students were obligated to enroll in their regular parish schools beginning in 1937, the enterprise became known as La Salle High School. La Salle's spirited sports teams, known as the Explorers, were characterized by disciplined groups of lads who were always ready to give battle to every opponent—usually involving schools much larger in enrollment. And that made the winning of many a City Championship, or Conference title, all the sweeter.

106 years. Echoes of the admonitions by these men reverberate. “Boys will be boys,” the students were told with frequency at the old school on North Centre Street, “but La Salle boys will be gentlemen!” True enough. A dose of reality, however, found its way into a witticism there. The Brothers sometimes found out that teaching in a small city necessitated a little more diplomacy than, say, ministry in a larger city. Among themselves, the Brothers would often joke, “Never make fun, out loud, of a kid in Cumberland.....because they're all

related to each other!" Exaggeration? Of course. But behind the laughter was a kernel of truth.

106 years. June 1966 was a watershed experience for these men in black, when La Salle High closed forever and, three months later, the splendid new Bishop Walsh High School on its mountaintop campus, opened its doors to both young men and women coming from La Salle and three area other Catholic high schools. At last, Western Maryland had one centralized Catholic high school, and these men exerted an enormous influence on what it meant to be a Bishop Walsh Spartan in the classrooms, laboratories, playing fields, and extracurriculars. They transitioned from the Blue and Gold of La Salle to the Burgundy and White of "B.W." with ease, because they always prioritized not themselves, but rather what was best for the students in their charge.

106 years. What started in 1907 (and even in the distant 1850s), however, will come to a close in Summer 2011. Those 104 continuous years, combined with those two pre-Civil War years, total 106. These men in black, namely the De La Salle Christian Brothers, must reluctantly leave Cumberland, probably forever. After reaching a peak number of thirteen Brothers at Bishop Walsh in the 1966-67 school year, their numbers have gradually subsided for various reasons, particularly because of the sharp nationwide decline of young Catholics entering religious life since the 1970s, and the inevitable graying and retirement of the Brothers who remain. The recent deaths of Brother Peter Hughes (2009) and Brother James Kirkpatrick (2010) reduced the Brothers' Community of four members to only two. Replacements are unavailable; it is an unfortunate situation repeated in every school conducted by the Brothers, and indeed, by virtually every Catholic school in the land. The Superiors of the Christian Brothers have written a thoughtful, appreciative letter to these two Brothers and to various Catholic groupings of Western Maryland to explain the situation.

106 years. And so it ends. Call it fate or karma. Call it inevitability. Call it the changing, evolving world which cannot be escaped.

But similarly, call it the passion for excellence in teaching, the commitment to the total student, the desire to be faithful to their Founder (and school namesake), St. John Baptist de La Salle, the Patron Saint of all Teachers. For 106 years these men have been the neighbors—both direct and indirect—of every Western Marylander. Graduates from La Salle and Bishop Walsh, whether they have journeyed near or far, have generated so much leadership in business, the health professions, public service, education, Church, and every other realm. In some ways, an "*embarras de richesses*" has resulted because of this treasure of talented alums.

Yes, Bishop Walsh School will continue, thankfully, with much gratitude to the School Sisters of Notre Dame and the outstanding laity who staff this enterprise—the only Catholic school for sixty miles in most directions. But the Christian Brothers will no longer reside in the hills and mountains of an area which has embraced them, as they themselves have been embraced, for over a century. Ironically, a certain Cumberlander known as Mrs. Herman Grabenstein, Jr. (Irene), who was granted Affiliated (Honorary) Membership in the Christian

Brothers in 1987 for her dedication as Administrative Assistant at La Salle and Bishop Walsh, will be the last living member of the Institute to live in Western Maryland! This lady's thirty-six years in that post have been fully recognized.

The Christian Brothers themselves do not desire attention for their role in Cumberland during this time. The thanks which they deserve has already been returned to them a hundredfold. The debt owed to the Brothers—marked “paid in full”—is the realization that so many generations of young people in Mountain Maryland (and neighboring West Virginia) have taken the best of the pedagogy, guidance and role-modeling they received, and have made a difference in the ways they were instructed to live. To teach is to constantly plant seeds which will fully awaken long after the teacher puts down the chalk or closes the book. Fortunately, countless Brothers have seen or have learned about the fruits of their specific labors in Cumberland.

St. Francis of Assisi once exhorted his followers, “Preach the Gospel.....and use words if necessary!” Lessons learned from the Christian Brothers at La Salle and at Bishop Walsh will long remain with the thousands of former students in these mountains, and beyond. But some of the most memorable lessons which the Brothers taught in Cumberland.....were precisely the ones in which not a word was spoken.

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