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Chapter 15. The Light on the Hill: Nurturing Leaders for Change

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Chapter 15

The Light on the Hill: Nurturing Leaders for Change

Nurturing Leaders for Change

For almost 125 years, Holy Ghost Prep has been providing young men with the moral, intellectual, and spiritual preparedness needed to excel in college and in life. Founded in 1897 by members of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit, the school aspires to form young men morally, intellectually, and spiritually in the Spiritan tradition, as they prepare for college and beyond. This tradition fosters the development of community in “one heart and one mind,” the cultivation of each student’s unique gifts, academic excellence, and generous service to the poor.

Holy Ghost Prep was founded by Father John Tuohill Murphy, CSSp, as Holy Ghost Apostolic College, a preparatory school and junior-college seminary for young men studying to become members of the religious order of the Holy Ghost Fathers and Brothers. In the 1950s, the school started to move its college-level program to Duquesne University; it opened its doors to non-seminarians in 1959 for the first time. In 1967, the seminary program was discontinued, and a year later Holy Ghost Preparatory School was incorporated as a non-profit institution. In the 1990s, the school began a long-range planning process, which resulted in significant structural enhancements to the campus, and today its enrollment consists entirely of non-resident, college-bound students.

As a proud alumnus of the school, Holy Ghost Prep President, Dr. Gregory J. Geruson (class of 1979) views his duties as considerably more than just running the private, all-male, Catholic school in Bensalem, Pennsylvania. He knows that he assumes the role of caretaker of a 123-year-old tradition of nurturing young men into leaders. Referring to one of the school’s late headmasters, Geruson says:

When I open the door of my office, I know that this was Father Francis X. Hanley's office. I think about having known Father Hanley, having seen him sitting in this office when I was a student, and how he helped mold me as a student and a person. I have a personal connection of knowing our history and tradition and want our students to carry it on through education and experiences.

A distinguished administrator and educator, Dr. Geruson is the first lay President in Holy Ghost Prep's history. Earlier in his career, he was Holy Ghost Prep's assistant headmaster for external affairs (1991–2001) and then Vice President of Institutional Advancement (2001–2004). Through his intimate history with the school, he has fostered relationships with alumni who can provide opportunities for Leadership Externship Advantage Program (LEAP) externships for students, and also to bring in guest speakers.

"Alums can be a mentoring resource," Dr. Geruson says. "They host a student at a job site where students can get up close and personal and have hands-on experience on what it is like to be an accountant, structural engineer, district attorney, or even a surgeon. They can help students find their path by reaching back with a steadying hand."



Fr. Daniel Sormani teaching class in the open air in COVID-19 era

Dr. Geruson has carried on a tradition that helps navigate young men on their journey to discover who God calls them to be. Under his leadership, helped by a student-to-faculty ratio of 9:1, Holy Ghost Prep's student body is thriving. One-hundred percent of its graduates are accepted into four-year colleges or universities, the average SAT score is near 1300, and an average of 115 colleges and university representatives visit the school annually.

"Ultimately, we believe that the Holy Spirit acts through each of us and is a part of all that we do. The path forward is not always crystal clear for the teenage boys that we educate; in fact, it can be downright murky," says Dr. Geruson. "And, therefore, a Spiritan education means that true faith can only be found through asking questions and prayerfully seeking answers."

Thanks to the seventy-five extracurricular activities at Holy Ghost Prep, ranging from mock trial to robotics to the school's signature speech and debate program, there are virtually endless opportunities for students to get engaged, to try new things, and to find their passion. And those opportunities aren't limited to just HGP's collegiate-level campus and facilities. The school has Spiritan brotherhood-building service immersion trips to the Dominican Republic, Tanzania, West Virginia, and the St. Francis Inn (in the Kensington section of Philadelphia). And our students always answer the call to serve others as they logged over 10,000 hours of community service last year.

"Part of our Spiritan charism is to care about the whole person," says AnnMarie Dougherty, Holy Ghost Prep's Director of College Guidance. "We get to know them as people, whether it's talking about a job opportunity to work at the shoe store in the mall, or picking a college, or when to take SATs. "That approach of getting to each young man and his hopes and dreams allows us to successfully prepare the leaders of tomorrow."

Patrick Hoelzle, a 2001 Holy Ghost Prep graduate who now serves as the school's Dean of Academics, concurs:

My favorite part of the Holy Ghost Prep mission statement is that we foster "the cultivation of each student's unique gifts." For me, this means that every individual person brings something special and unique to the table that makes the *entire* community better. It is with this in mind that Holy Ghost Prep strives to form young men into ethical, individual, and empathetic leaders by doing two things: offering countless opportunities to take on leadership roles, and providing teacher-led support in those roles.

The Alumni Testify

We solicited the thoughts of a handful of Holy Ghost Prep graduates to see how Holy Ghost Prep taught them leadership skills as a student and how they use those Spiritan-based skills to help nurture tomorrow's leaders today.

Father Bill Christy, CSSp, a 1982 Holy Ghost Prep graduate who now serves as the Duquesne University Chaplain and the Director of Spiritan Campus Ministry, says:

The fundamental component to Holy Ghost Prep is community. It's the special sauce that makes the Ghost experience unique. Before HGP was a prep school it was a seminary for the Spiritans and the seminary ethos was that forming a community, a fraternal bond between the students, was as equally important as imparting a sound education. Somehow that ethos remained when the school moved from being a seminary to being a Prep school and it is the continuation of that fraternal spirit alongside a good academic formation that endures until today. The physical, mental, psychological, and spiritual transformation that goes on in a young man between fourteen and eighteen is remarkable and when that transformation can take place in a community that is intellectually challenging, spiritually edifying and fraternally supportive a well-formed man can emerge.

Fr. Christy continues:

Holy Ghost Prep was one of the key places that taught me how to form a community. I think that's why HGP alumni are so successful; they know how to form a community. In any endeavor, in any occupation, if you can form a community you can make a positive impact. And while it is easy to see how being able to form a community can be valuable in law, medicine, business, academia or any other career, its truest worth is displayed when it is used to form a family. It's wonderful when Holy Ghost can boast about college acceptance rates and scholarships awarded but its greatest achievement is in the families that its graduates have made.

John Buettler (class of 1964) returned to his alma mater, Holy Ghost Prep, from Duquesne University to begin teaching English in September of 1969. From

that September morning until his “last lecture,” his commencement address to the graduating class of 2014, Buettler became an iconic figure at Holy Ghost Prep, for over forty-five years serving as a teacher, forensics coach, counselor, and mentor to his students. Buettler and his wife, Arlene, even sent their four sons to Holy Ghost: Jeff ’91, Mark ’95, Stephen ’99 and John ’02.

The foundation of Buettler’s leadership skills was laid at Holy Ghost Prep, and so were those of his sons and the thousands of students he mentored in his four-and-a-half decades at the school. Says Buettler:

I haven’t looked up a definition of leadership, but my own definition would be that it is the ability to stand before a group of people and move them to follow you in pursuing a particular purpose. This is a quality that is innate in some people—we say they have charisma—but not necessarily in others. Nonetheless, it is an ability that can be seeded, nurtured, and grown into fullness. I think that this is what happened to me when I came to Holy Ghost Prep in 1960 as a freshman. I hadn’t really thought much about leadership before that. I wasn’t on any sports teams and, at the grade school I attended, we didn’t have any other competitive teams to be involved in. What opened the door to me was student government and drama and the fact that I was encouraged to become involved in those things. This required me to do things that I had never done before, working with others in a common purpose, organizing, persuading and, to my dismay, public speaking and acting. The latter two made me distinctly uncomfortable, but I had to do it. In other words, Holy Ghost stretched me, offered me opportunities to come out of my comfort zone and encouraged me to say yes. It was both a seeding and nurturing environment and, as I could see as I continued my involvement at HGP as a teacher, drama director and forensic coach for forty-five years, Holy Ghost continued to be that kind of environment for countless other young men who came through the doors as young boys with no idea of the potential that they had and who, four years later, went out those same doors well on their way to becoming leaders in whatever environment and vocation they would choose.

Buettler believes that Holy Ghost Prep, because of the school’s intimate size (with 425 students total in grades nine through twelve), is a uniquely personal place where leaders are born and nurtured in whatever future endeavor

they choose.

I think that the most important things that I learned about leadership is that no matter what other qualities it has—planning, organizing, anticipating, etc.—leadership is first and foremost personal. It involves allowing other people to know you and making the effort to get to know them. Any leader of an organization is, first and foremost, a leader of people. No one is encouraged by someone who simply points and says “go there.”

A leader has to know the person, what he needs, how best to help him achieve it, and encourage him to see that he can achieve it. He or she has to care. I believe that this is true no matter what the setting—in a classroom, an activity whether academic, artistic or athletic, an organization, a business or any other endeavor. It is taking the time and making the effort to believe in someone and showing them that you believe in them. For me, Holy Ghost Prep has always been a uniquely personal place, a place where people, students and teachers, are encouraged to come together, try new things, get to know each other, work together, encourage each other to use their talents and accomplish wonderful things.

One of the many young men that Buettler mentored over the years is Hoelzle, who became the school’s Dean of Academics prior to the start of the 2019–20 school year. Patrick Hoelzle figures to be one of the school’s leaders for years to come. He says:

Personally, I can attribute a lot of my own leadership development to my experiences at Holy Ghost, whether it was through one of the athletic teams I played on or one of the clubs I was involved with. At HGP, I was given not only the opportunity to take on various leadership roles, but also received an avalanche of support and guidance from my teachers and coaches. I’d be remiss if I didn’t mention some specific experiences and teachers that left an indelible mark on me: Mr. Rob Buscaglia and the Ayudanica service trip, Mr. Dan Ryan and the senior retreat, and Mr. John Buettler and Mr. Tony Figliola and the forensics team. Being given the opportunity to take on leadership roles in each of those experiences, which were all *very* different, served as the foundation on

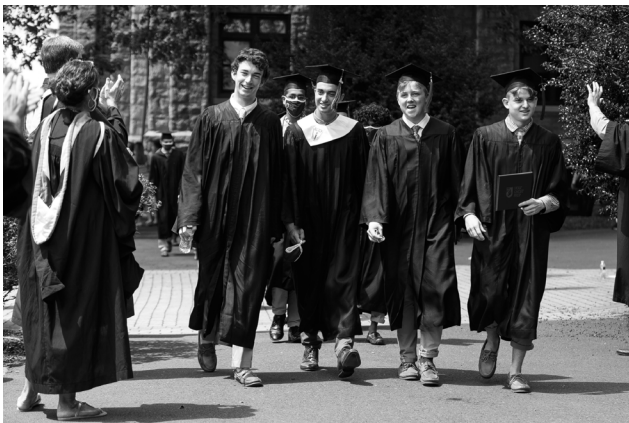
which the continuation of my leadership development is built and the inspiration for my core beliefs of leadership.

For me, true leaders create and maintain relationships built on trust, respect, empathy, and open communication. Then, and only then, is growth for every individual member and the community as a whole possible. Those experiences I had at Holy Ghost Prep shaped those ideals and, without them, I wouldn't be where I am today.

As one of Holy Ghost Prep's key administrators, Hoelzle tries to pay it forward—taking the leadership skills honed at Ghost to help transform the next generation of Holy Ghost Prep leaders.

My experiences as a student at Holy Ghost Prep continue to influence my perspective and actions as a school leader and stand as the foundation for my leadership beliefs and style. In my role, my primary responsibilities include meeting the academic needs of students, the professional needs of teachers, and the emotional needs of parents. While the technical skills of each of those responsibilities differ, they all have one thing in common: they're not about me.

Leadership is about responding to the needs of the people around me. In other words, leadership is not letting my own ego get in the way. Growth for individuals and the community as a whole is not possible if my mountain-sized ego is standing in the way. By understanding this, which took me a very



long time to realize, I am able to use my leadership position to encourage students, teachers, and parents to explore their own passions and interests—their unique gifts and talents—in order to better the entire HGP community.

Conclusion

Dr. Geruson believes that the tradition of Holy Ghost Prep being a Light on the Hill, a place that nurtures leaders for change, doesn't happen by accident. He credits the school's Spiritan charism, the small classroom sizes, and the tireless efforts of the school's faculty and staff with providing each student with the perfect environment to grow and thrive. He says:

Holy Ghost Prep is the only Spiritan high school in the United States and each of the 425 boys on campus is known and valued for who he is and for the unique gifts he possesses. All are guided by educators who understand young men and how they develop. Our students have the freedom to be themselves, take on any role, explore their passions, and find their niche. We know boys. We know how to engage them and personalize their experience here. We know their concerns and vulnerabilities, their strengths and enthusiasms, and we know how they bond. Most important: We know how to work with them, support them, and motivate them. As members of an inclusive community grounded in respect and kindness, we join together to make every corner of the Holy Ghost Prep campus a workshop for intellectually curious young minds. Our approach clearly works as 100% of our graduates head off to college, and many of them matriculate to our nation's premier universities and blossom into leaders with a lifelong desire for helping others.

Bill Doherty
Director of Communications