



My Catholic education

HELPED ME BECOME WHO I AM

Cover story

Story and photos by Lois Czerniak



“I try to be helpful to people,” she says. “We’re all given things, and it’s just nice to be able to give back, to be able to help and see where needs are and try to meet those needs.”

Dr. Morissette says she was involved in a lot of service activities at St. Dom’s, including being a member of the Keyettes and then the Key Club, when it started accepting girls, something particularly special to her because her dad was a founding member. She says St. Dom’s provided a lot of opportunities to become involved in clubs and sports, and she took advantage of them.

“I don’t remember really ever sitting down to eat lunch when I was in high school. I was so busy with so many different activities,” she says. “It was a good experience growing up. It really was.”

She says the environment was welcoming and the teachers encouraging. She credits them and her family with helping her excel academically, critical, she says, because admission to veterinary school is so competitive.

“I was definitely not the smartest kid in my class but was very determined and worked really

hard with the encouragement of my family and teachers. Being able to graduate as valedictorian from St. Dom’s definitely was very helpful in ultimately helping me to attend the University of Pennsylvania School of Veterinary Medicine. It definitely taught me that if you work hard enough, anything is possible. More than that, though, I felt like when I set out to attend college, I was just super prepared.”

Although it’s been 30 years since she graduated, Dr. Morissette says she still sees that same supportive atmosphere today. She has a daughter who is a junior at St. Dom’s, and her son, who applied to be an assistant chaplain next year, is a freshman.

“It’s nice to see that the teachers are still just as committed,” she says. “It’s just a group of people who aren’t necessarily there because of how much they get paid. They’re there because this is what they want to do. That definitely showed through when I was in school, and I still see it showing through now when my kids are in school. It’s just the kind of place you want to remain around.”

Jason Jendrasko feels the same way about St. Brigid School in Portland, where his son is in second grade. Jendrasko says his family’s connection to the school and one of its predecessors, St. Joseph, goes back generations.

“I come from long generations of people who went through St. Joe’s. My great-grandmother was in one of the first graduating classes there. Then, my mother and her siblings all went there. Then, my siblings, and me, and my cousins went there. Now, my sister has three children there, and I have a son there, and I’ll have a daughter there in a couple of years,” he says.

Jendrasko says he took pride in attending St. Joseph School because of that legacy and the stories passed down to him, but he says it was much more than that.

Claire Morissette Girardin grew up caring for pets.

“We had ducks, guinea pigs. I had a rat at one point, turtles,” she says. “We had cats when I was little.”

So, it may not be all that surprising to learn that even from the age of 3, she knew what she wanted to be: a veterinarian.

“When I was growing up, it was just something my parents knew I wanted to do,” she says. “I love animals.”

She has now been a veterinarian for 20 years and still enjoys going to work every day.

“I think one of the most rewarding things is watching pets grow and watching the bonds with people as they grow. It’s just really amazing,” she says. “I think the reason I love animals is that they don’t want much from us. They just want our love and affection.”

Dr. Morissette, as she is known professionally, credits her Catholic school education for giving her the foundation she needed to not only achieve her dream of becoming a veterinarian but also for helping her become the person she is today. Growing up in Lewiston, she attended St. Peter School and then St. Dominic Regional High School, now Saint Dominic Academy, which has campuses in both Lewiston and Auburn.

“Your early experiences, the experiences you have as your brain is developing, are really important to developing the foundation for what you decide to do with your life and how you decide to live it,” she says. “You won’t always be the strongest. You won’t always be the fastest. You won’t always be this or that, but you can be a good person.”

She says the values she learned at a young age have remained with her into her adult life.

“More so than legacy is the structure and values, personal values, and learning how to be a human,” he says. “I think that everything starts with the values, and from there, it creates that community, and it creates the way that you project the community onto others.”

He says that structure, so important in helping him succeed, and the values instilled at the school are why it was so important for him to have his own children attend St. Brigid School.

“I want them to have the right values and to witness it as I did. My mother and my father did a lot for me and always stressed how important it was with family, and community, and God, and Church. I feel that I was raised well and do well and am fortunate to have the life I have. I like to think I am a good person for others because of it, and I want that for my children. I want them to know the proper way to treat a person, the proper way to carry themselves in a meeting, the proper way to communicate with somebody, to help people when they need help,” he says. “For my son, I want him to be a perfect gentleman, and for my daughter, I want her to feel the respect that she deserves. There is a lot that happens in this world, and I want them to be the good part of that.”

He says he also wants to make sure they understand the importance of keeping God in their lives.

“You want them to know that God is with them, and God is with them wherever they may be, so they don’t have this feeling of loneliness. I think it’s very important for them to know they’re never alone,” he says.

Jendrasko says he has many good memories of his years at St. Joseph and, later, Cheverus High School, and he wants his children to be able to say the same when they are older.

“You don’t realize when you’re growing up what kind of impact it has on you, but as an adult, you do start to realize,” he says.

Many of the friendships he made during his school years remain today, Jendrasko says.

“There are a lot of memories, lots of great relationships, strong relationships that I have that I don’t feel you can get elsewhere,” he says. “I went to the University of Maine, and I would tell stories about my friends from my high school, how we get back together, and they were like, ‘I don’t even talk to anyone from my class.’ So, there is just a lot of camaraderie, just strong relationships that seem to have developed.”

He says the connections he made and still has, as well as the communications skills he learned, serve him well today in his job as the business development manager for Benchmark, a construction management company. The company’s recent projects included the second phase of the St. Francis Apartments in Waterville.

“In my professional career, those stories and connections have led to working professionally with others,” he says. “There is always a story and a connection back. I don’t know if that has helped me to be able to have work come in, but it certainly helps the conversations flow ... It’s helped me to be able to have those conversations and be comfortable in those environments and communicate with people.”

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– Jason Jendrasko

Jendrasko says he is fortunate because his company puts family first, which has allowed him to be active in the St. Brigid community. He says he tries to help out where needed, which has included volunteering at the school’s Harvest Fair and

Grandparents’ Day. He is also a member of the St. Pius X Council of the Knights of Columbus.

“I joined that council to be able to be in an organization that gives back to our parish,” he says.

Jendrasko says being of service is another way of carrying on the legacy of his parents, to whom he says he is grateful.

“My parents have always been there and have always done everything. My father’s the hardest working man I know. He’s constantly, constantly working but

has never missed a thing in my life. And my mother has never not been there,” he says. “It’s created a lot of great memories and strong values, because you see everybody volunteering and everybody helping out and offering up what they can.”

Danielle Pickrell says those values are something she learned when she attended St. Michael School in Augusta and which she now teaches students in her kindergarten class there.

“Looking back on my experience, I am definitely appreciative



of not only having the faith built into the education but the morals and the values,” she says. “I think it was huge for me to grow up with that, to have really strong faith, and then to be able to bring it back now into my own classroom.”

Pickrell teaches in the same kindergarten classroom where she once sat and studied, although at the time, the school was St. Mary’s. It became St. Michael after merging with St. Augustine School in 2007.

She says one of the things she remembers most about her school days was the strong sense of community, one that still exists today.

“It played a big part in our upbringing,” she says. “You cannot beat the sense of family and the community feeling that is here. It’s across the board.”

She says the faculty at St. Michael is always there for one another, ready to lift someone up if they’re having a bad day.

“We don’t get a lot of time together, but when we do, we very much enjoy each other’s company and support each other,” she says. “I couldn’t imagine teaching anywhere else because the people that I work with are, honestly, friends and family. It would be like leaving a piece of me to not be here.”

She says she develops a similar bond with her students, each year, every year.

“Every child who comes into my classroom becomes a piece of my family for the year. Then, I watch them the next year and the next year,” she says. “At the end of the year, it’s like, ‘Oh, my gosh, I can’t believe that I’m letting you go.’ It’s hard to believe that you’ll bond with another class, but you always do.”

Pickrell says she is so appreciative for the support of families who send their children to St. Michael School.

“Not everybody looks forward to parent-teacher conferences, but I love to touch base with these families who are supportive and kind. They’re a joy to be with. I tell my families in my newsletters and emails, thank you for sharing your best gift with me every single day, which is your child.”

Pickrell says coming out of college, she didn’t have her mind set on becoming a Catholic school teacher. When an opening came up for a middle school math and science teacher at St. Michael, she viewed it as a way to get her foot in the door. She says, however, just sitting for the interview gave her the feeling of coming home.

“It felt very easy, very natural, and it’s been that way ever since,” she says. “Through the years, that has only gotten stronger.”

From middle school, she transitioned to pre-K and then kindergarten. There were changes in her personal life as well. She got married and now has two children, a 7-year-old son in first grade and a 4-year-old daughter in pre-K, both at St. Michael. She wouldn’t have it any other way.

“It was non-negotiable that my children would come to school here,” she says. “I think we offer children a place that is not available elsewhere, a place for them to have that family feel, that small classroom size, to be with the same kids for multiple years.”



Danielle Pickrell



She says St. Michael School also sets high academic standards. She

remembers how prepared she was when it was time to move on to high school.

“I remember feeling incredibly prepared academically going into those freshman year classes and thinking, ‘I’ve already done a lot of this. We’re reading books I read in middle school,’” she says.

Pickrell says having children in the school has only made her passion for her job grow stronger.

“My son is doing his sacrament prep, so I’m becoming even more connected with that community here, meeting other parents who are going through the same things,” she says. “It’s truly like a big family.”

She says it has also made her more appreciative of the gift that her parents gave her by making the financial sacrifices necessary for her to attend Catholic school. It is why when her dad recently retired, she says she bought him a pretty expensive gift.

“They didn’t have to pay for my education — they could have put me in a public school — but he worked hard to do that,” she says. “There is no real way to say thank you for that.” ■

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