

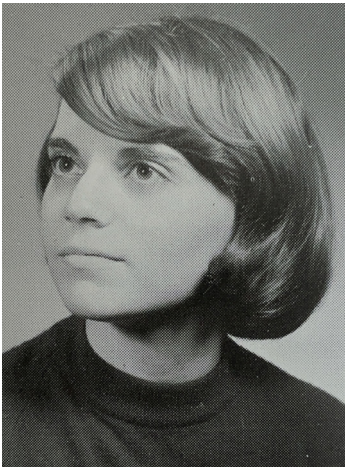
Building on the Past Into the Future

During the 2020-21 school year, the President of The Catholic High School of Baltimore, Dr. Barbara D. Nazelrod '68, is celebrating her 20th anniversary as president, making her the longest tenured head of any secondary school in the Archdiocese of Baltimore. Her bond with Catholic high was forged long before she became head and even pre-dates her attendance as a student of her beloved alma mater. To explain how her lifelong relationship with Catholic High has impacted her life and benefitted the school under her leadership, she agreed to be interviewed this summer in honor of the 20th anniversary of her presidency.



What are your earliest memories of Catholic High?

I always wanted to come to school here. I grew up on Preston Street, slightly southwest of the school and from my bedroom window I could see the school and I remember asking my mom, "What is that?" And she said, "It's a Catholic high school for girls." And I remember saying to her, "Can I go to school there?" I was very small. That's my first memory. I also remember driving past the school with my family on the way home from various places because no matter where we went points north we had to come down Edison Highway to go home. I remember seeing the statue of the Blessed Mother. That has always been in my memory as I have always associated Catholic High with that statue. And I remember everyone in my family making the Sign of the Cross as we drove by. It always was there and very impressive to me. We moved from East Baltimore to the Towson area and I was



the only student in my class at IHM who came here for high school. In many ways for me, coming here for high school was like a continuation of my childhood. My family was not wealthy by any means but my parents valued education and if I said that I wanted to go to Catholic High, they made it happen.

How did you go from Student to President of Catholic High?

Catholic High absolutely was the center of my life and my four years here as a student were just awesome. I lost touch with Catholic High after graduation, as many graduates do. I remember one day being in a class and my classmate behind me and I were talking. She said to

me, "What do you want to do with your life?" I said, "I want to come back here to teach one day." So she drew up a certificate that had me coming back to Catholic High as a history teacher. Years later, while working for Baltimore County Public Schools, I saw in the alumnae newsletter that there was an opening for Head of School, it wasn't called President then. I didn't know if Head of School was the principal or if it was an academic position. I didn't know. But regardless, I figured I have experience in administration, in curriculum and instruction, and I had supervised teachers for 12 years, so I thought whatever it is I'll just give it a try. Sr. Margaret Lewis called me on a Sunday afternoon and was so happy to tell

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me. "You're our candidate!" And I declined. I said, "Thank you, but no thank you. I can't accept it." I had 28 years in Baltimore County and could retire with full benefits at 30. And I thought to myself, "Why give up this great career when I don't really know what I am getting myself into." I spent the next 48 hours in absolute misery. And I felt like I had a Saint Paul experience. I was driving out to Cockeysville Middle School the Tuesday after that Sunday and I knew I had to change my mind. When I got to Cockeysville Middle I asked the secretary for a phone book and I looked up the number to Little Flower convent. I used the phone right there in the middle of the office and called Sr. Margaret. She answered the phone and I said, "I know I told you no, but may I change my decision? May I accept the job?" Well, she started to cry and said, "We were praying that you would change your mind! We were praying you would change your mind!"

What memories stand out to you most about your time at Catholic High?

It's a hard question because I did not know what I know now, of course, and I didn't know when I started here exactly what the school needed. I recognized that the school needed help in a variety of ways. Financially we were struggling. The enrollment then was higher than it is now but it was really low by comparison. The building and campus needed improvements. We had barbed wire around a chain link fence around the school—literally barbed wire wrapped around the chain link fence around the school. The building was very worn down, so I quickly knew I had to improve the look of the school. It needed a new roof because it was leaking everywhere. I took a three-pronged approach: improve the appearance and function of the school, strengthen the academics—which is why people come to school, and improve alumnae relations. The chain link fence and the barbed wire had to go. I was able to get a matching grant from France-Merrick for the \$40k, we needed for a new fence. At that time, it could have been \$40m, and we raised 20 and France-Merrick matched the 20 so we were able to put this fence around the school, which greatly improved our appearance. I knew we had to strengthen the academic program and felt that Catholic High needed a signature program, a reason to come here. And it was another Holy Spirit moment, when I was sitting in a hotel lobby on the Eastern Shore waiting to meet a friend. It was then that I came up for the rationale for STEM. It made sense. Engineering was important and I wanted a program that was not traditionally for women. I knew that at that time there was no STEM program in Catholic high schools, so we put it in first.

*“We are, first and foremost,
a welcoming community.”*

How has Catholic High benefitted from its relationship with Alumnae during your tenure as President?

The big challenge with our alumnae, which is a good challenge, is that we have multi generations of alums. So we have, from the very beginning, had to work very hard to come up with events that would appeal to older alums, middle age alums, the ones with children, the ones who are newly out of high school, and how to bring them back just to keep them engaged. I think we've been really successful with that. Our alumnae are

very generous. There were so many things that needed attention when I arrived, like almost immediately. And with the STEM program, we started bringing in young women from everywhere, every county, so we decided to create an engineering room. We needed 50 thousand dollars to equip the engineering room and I got a call from a widower of an alum who said, “Can I come in to see you? My sons and I want to make a gift to the school.” Mr. George Kramer came with his sons and we sat out here on the porch, rocking in these rocking chairs. The next thing I know he's giving me a check for 50 thousand dollars. I asked, “Is it ok with you if we name the engineering room after your wife?” He loved the idea and to this day they still give money to the Joanne Liberatore Kramer '59 Engineering Room.

What do you tell people who ask, “Why should I send my daughter to Catholic High?”

All of the Catholic high schools overlap; we are all similar in many ways, our Catholic identity for sure. Catholic High has a different lens, a Franciscan lens. We get our identity and our mission and values from the Sisters of St. Francis of Philadelphia. We are their only sponsored high school. For example, as a Franciscan school we are purposefully hospitable. We expect our students to greet people in the building, to welcome them. We are first and foremost a welcoming community. I think many people come in here and they feel it. But the education is excellent at Catholic High. Academics must be really strong to keep students. We also stress leadership and, at Catholic High, our young women can be engaged however they want. They often are front and center at Masses, at assemblies, common homerooms. Often the adults—the faculty and staff—take a back seat while the students lead. We make that a priority here and we are proud that we are preparing young women to be future leaders.

How is Catholic High's location and diversity integral to its mission and a strength for the school?

We are the cornerstone of the Belair-Edison community and we have been since the 30s. We are very conveniently located so students from all parts of Greater Baltimore can get here. The really important thing, I think, is that we recognize the value of being in this community the same way the community recognizes our value of being a cornerstone of the community. We are an institution of strength for them and the fact that we are here complements them. I don't look at our being in the city as a negative, I view it as a plus. When our students

come here they look around and they see this beautiful campus in the middle of this older neighborhood but they also recognize how important we are to the community. They're respectful, and the community is respectful right back. We have students from 78 zip codes, so we're like a hub here and they literally come from all directions. We have young women here whose parents are millionaires. We have young women here whose parents are at poverty level. And then we have everybody in between. We have a variety of races, ethnic backgrounds, academic abilities. They come from a variety of schools, both public and private. But when they come here in those uniforms...there's a sisterhood here, there's a community here. They come here and they become part of the community. I can't tell you how it happens, but it is like magic.

What is your hope for the students who graduate from Catholic High?

I would like to think each young woman who graduates from Catholic High is a young woman who is centered in her faith and who believes that she needs to do good in the world. That's what our mission statement talks about, responsible leadership. The world needs good, moral leadership. I can think of several students who graduated who have just done amazing things in spite of many odds, but they learned determination here, they learned confidence. They also learned that hard work will make a lot of things possible. I want them to leave here and to be good, just people and to advocate for others and to lead good lives.

Graduation Day is a hard day for me because my emotions are like right there. I love handing the graduates their diplomas and looking them in the eye and saying something to each one, something different, something about them I know. Of course, that's very fleeting and once they walk out of the Cathedral, they are scattered. And I worry about them. Honestly, I do

worry about them. Each year, I think, is becoming more and more challenging. This year was the most difficult year with the pandemic. But for the big picture I want them to achieve their best, whatever that is, and I want them to know that education is a lifelong process and it changes the playing field forever.

You are now the longest-tenured Head of School in the Archdiocese. How is such consistent leadership a benefit to the school and how has 20 years of experience in the position made you a better leader today?

It's gone by fast. I do see it as a strength because I can fall back on a whole variety of experiences and situations and take a step back and look at whatever it is in front of me in that moment and try and figure out, "OK how do I handle this?" Every day is a challenge; I learn every day. But I'm also very excited every day to pull into my parking space. I've never regretted leaving my career in Baltimore County; I've never looked back. I do believe that Catholic High needs to build on its past but grow into the future and constantly be reinvented in some, maybe small way. I often say that we don't plateau. Like we put in the STEM program but we just didn't say, "There it is. It's good, we're going to leave it alone." We continue to change it, build on it. The Biomedical program sprung out of STEM. And

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then we had to balance that with something that wasn't Science-related, so we put in Law and Leadership in the Franciscan Tradition. Then we built on the Arts. We have a Performing Arts concentration, which includes theatre, vocal, instrumental and dance. We have a dance studio now. We are always looking to make it better. What can we do now? What are our weaknesses, what do we need to change, or do away with? And we have. We've abandoned some things because they weren't working but we keep trying to get it right. In my time we've upgraded the facilities. We've installed new boilers, the roof, windows, the fence, the auditorium, the library, the dining hall, and the engineering room. Another huge strength here is the administrative team. I don't micromanage them. I work a lot through my administrative team and through each of our employees. I keep my finger on the pulse of every department: academics, finance, institutional advancement. I work through every department of the school and if I needed to micromanage them then they shouldn't be here.



When you encounter a prospective student, what do you say to her to gauge whether Catholic High would be a good fit for her and her family?

When I meet with prospective parents, I'm often asked that question: "My daughter's not a Straight A student, she's not Catholic, we're not Catholic, can she come here?" But for me the barometer is, "Does your daughter want to come here and if she wants to come here we will make it happen." Whether that's financial or academic, even social, we will work with her. That's the barometer, does she want to come here.



People who work closest with you often mention your deep love for the school and how that seems to keep you energized for the job, even after two decades as President. How do you approach the job today and what are your hopes for Catholic High?

I want us to be open another 80 years. I want young women in Greater Baltimore to choose to come here. I want the school to continue to attract young women who still value a Catholic High education. And I want them to feel like a part of the school community and to have them engage with the school and with each other for years to come. But I also think that schools can't just rest. You have to continue to make changes that reflect what is happening in our world. I think we've done that well over the last 20 years. And we are going to continue to do that. There are still several things that we discuss around the board room table regarding the future and where we go from here and I think we always have to have an outlook for the future that keeps the best interest of Catholic High in focus. I'll have older alums here for an event and they'll walk by a classroom and say, "Oh my gosh, I had Stenography here, do you still have Stenography." And I say, "No, but we have Engineering." Or they'll say, "Do you still have Bookkeeping?" I'll say, "No, we do have a clinical simulation lab and the former Home Economics classroom is now our dance studio." I always say to members of my team, you have to ask the question: "What is the right thing to do for the school? That's what you do. If you put Catholic High first, you're not going to make a mistake." You could veer off a little

bit but you'll always get back to center and that's doing what's best for the school, not the brick and mortar of the school but the whole entity, the whole school community, and the amazing women who went to school here and the ones who are still here today and who will be here. It's a huge responsibility but I never feel like it's on me alone because I do have such a great team and I have, thank God, a great board that is extremely supportive. And the Sisters have been extremely supportive through the years in a variety of ways.

I feel very purposeful. I feel like I'm still doing good. I genuinely care about the school. I love the school. I love what it represents in Baltimore, in the Church, for the Sisters. I love what the school represents for all of our students and all of our alums and their families. I know we represent so much to so many people and that's our strength. It's not just an institution where you go to school for four years and then you're gone. It becomes a part of the fabric of people's lives.

This school will always be, as it has been, an integral part of my life. I can't think of my childhood without thinking of Catholic High. I can't think about my teenage years without thinking about Catholic High. And I can't think of my professional life without thinking about Catholic High. Even if I'm 95 years old and have the ability to remember, I will always remember and reflect on my time here, both as a child, but I think more importantly as a part of this great school community. Sister Ann said not long ago that I bleed green. I think she's right in many ways.

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