

# Parents' Association Newsletter

THOMAS AQUINAS COLLEGE

Winter 2022

## An Open Letter to My Parents

*"Fanning the Flame"*

By Hope Ascough (CA '22)

Dear Mom and Dad,

When I was 7 years old, you brought us to a historical site only a few hours from home: Clonmacnoise, Ireland. We learned that, in the 7<sup>th</sup> century, Christianity in Ireland had dwindled to only the few saintly, scholastic monks at this monastery. From those humble stone walls the monks spread the understanding and fire of the Faith throughout the whole of the country — and from there to the rest of Europe, America, and beyond.

Unfortunately, the Faith has dwindled to but a flicker in Ireland once more. You needed to turn to an American distance-learning program for my high school education because there were no good Catholic options at home. And when it came time for me to choose a college, there was not one official Catholic school in the country.

However, you raised us to put up a fight for truth, and that's how I found Thomas Aquinas College. Coming here was not an easy decision to make, due to finances and the 6,000 miles that it would put between our family and me, but you nevertheless supported me wholeheartedly.

Dad, I remember your late nights in the office to make this education possible. Mom, I know it's not easy to let your little ducklings fly so far away, but you made that sacrifice, knowing that I would be better off for it.

I recently listened to a podcast which described education as the "proper cultivation of the mind and the right ordering of the will." I can confidently and gratefully say that you have provided me with such an education.

Thomas Aquinas College has cultivated my mind through our discussions of the greatest thoughts of the greatest thinkers, teaching me to ask meaningful questions which affect how I will live the rest of my life, questions such as: What is happiness? Is there a God? If so, can we prove that He exists? Can we know anything about Him? What is my role as a citizen, and why should I care?

The College has also shown me how to rightly order my will through the example of faculty, staff, and fellow students who help me see what is true, good, and beautiful. I have never met such a concentration of good people who lead me in love and virtue.

These four years have given me the tools to live a happy life in accord with the truth and to share this truth with others. That's why, after I graduate this spring, I plan to work as a teacher here in the U.S. for a few years and earn a degree in education. I then hope to return home and bring back to Ireland the excellent sort of education I have experienced here.

I think back on the little monastery in Clonmacnoise, and I see a striking resemblance between it and Thomas Aquinas College. Just like the small group of scholastic monks who studied the Faith and, from that little community, spread its fire across the world, we at TAC study the compelling case for the Faith and, from there, are equipped to change our culture for Christ.



**“You raised us to put up a fight for truth, and that’s how I found Thomas Aquinas College.”**

All my love,  
Hope

# Preparing for Life After Graduation

TAC's New College & Career Counselor, Daniel Selmeczy ('08)

Walk into St. Joseph Commons during lunch hour, and you are likely to see Daniel Selmeczy ('08), sitting amid a group of students, avidly conversing about their studies and their goals. A student was once overheard asking, "When does that guy ever stop working?"

It's a fair question. Dan is Thomas Aquinas College's first full-time college and career advisor, having started last fall, and he is passionate about his work.

After his family escaped Communist Hungary when he was still a baby, Dan grew up as an atheist in Northern California. He first stumbled upon the College by chance in high school, when a friend suggested he could stay on the California campus while visiting other schools in the area. Those few nights, however, would soon turn into four years.

"The students all had interesting things to say when I asked them about language, or matter and form, or justice," he recalls. "And the camaraderie that I saw in the dorm — I really wanted that." So Dan entered the College as a freshman in 2004, and he entered the Catholic Church at the next spring's Easter Vigil.

With a background in ballroom dance, he made a splash on campus, balancing his studies with the dance workshops he led for fellow students on weekends. When it came time to graduate, he knew he wanted to go into teaching, but wasn't sure which kind. "It was always a debate between academic teaching and teaching dance," he says.

Providentially, Dan was able to choose both. The summer after his graduation, he returned to the College to teach dance as a prefect on the High School Summer Program. Then, that fall, he began teaching Latin at St. Monica Academy in Pasadena. He would continue this arrangement for the next 13 years — only this summer, after serving as



a Summer Program prefect on both coasts, he married his wife, Mary, and then began his new position at the College.

Working so many summers on the High School Program soon made Dan a resource for younger prefects, who would come to him for direction and advice. Through these exchanges, he developed a gift for counseling that serves him well in his new position.

"The most exciting part of my job is being able to have powerful conversations with students and help them make decisions about what work they would like to do," he says. "So I lead them through exercises where we talk about their past experiences and try to hone in on a couple of areas, and sometimes something very concrete emerges." From there, he assists students in finding summer internships and work related to their desired fields. "That aids them not only in their discernment, but also in getting experience that they can add to their résumés or maybe even getting a foot in the door at a company that they would like to work for after they graduate."

Connecting students with alumni and parents is key to the process. "It helps the students a lot to talk with our alumni,"

**“Even just a half an hour’s conversation with a professional who works in the field can make all the difference for someone who is trying to break in.”**

Dan says. "Even just a half an hour's conversation with a professional who works in the field can make all the difference for someone who is trying to break in." Speaking to graduates who have found success in a wide range of areas also helps students become more aware of the opportunities available to them.

"The work that students do here can set them up to be successful in areas that they might not expect," Dan says. "When you learn how to speak well, and you know how to listen, and you know how to learn difficult material quickly, even if you don't yet have the particular skills for a given job, you have what it takes to learn them. Being able to reason and communicate well is a valuable foundation upon which to build further success."

# Raise Your Glass

## *A Toast on Behalf of TAC Parents at the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Gala*

**By Paula Cummings, president of the TAC Parents' Association**

On behalf of the 3,100 parents of current students and alumni, I would like to offer a toast to the College in recognition of a stunningly impressive and successful 50 years. We, the parents, are exceedingly appreciative of Thomas Aquinas College and the blessing that it has been for each of our children.

As parents, and especially as parents of faith, we take seriously our role of forming our children in all aspects of their life, particularly their intellectual, moral, and spiritual development. From the beginning of our parenting journey, we seek to identify our children's talents, to form their minds, and to provide them a faith in order that they may become the person God made them to be — all this so that they may flourish in this life and prepare for eternal life.

After many years of this parenting endeavor, the moment arrives for releasing one's child to their college years. This moment comes with both excitement and wonder for both the child and the parents. Thomas Aquinas College, with its goal of forming the whole person, has made that transition a comfort, a blessing, and a joy for us parents. We are so delighted and impressed with each of our children's beautiful growth in intellect, virtue, and faith garnered in their years at TAC.

On behalf of all the parents of the students who have or are attending Thomas Aquinas College, I want to thank the founders, the board, the benefactors, the tutors, the chaplains, the administration and staff, the parents and the students for making TAC the God-centered, intellectually excellent, and joy-filled institution that it is.

Please raise your glass and join me. We, the parents, toast the past 50 years of Thomas Aquinas College and praise its success — and wish it Godspeed for the next 50 years. Thank you.



**“As parents, and especially as parents of faith, we take seriously our role of forming our children in all aspects of their life.”**

## Important and Wonderful

### *TAC Dad Demonstrates Celestial Motion for Students*



At Thomas Aquinas College, sophomores embark on a journey of astronomical mathematics. They begin with Ptolemy of Ancient Greece, then explore the works of his successors. “We study these things as a chronicle of humanity's striving to apprehend the universe around it,” says Tutor Dr. Christopher Oleson. “Not only is it important, it's wonderful.”

The father of two TAC seniors, Tom VanDamme came to the California campus in the fall to present his company's Horizon Globe, an armillary designed to visualize Ptolemy's model of the universe and its motion. Made up of discs, rings, and magnets, the globe helps astronomy newcomers make sense of the at-times confounding movement of stars and planets.

Mr. VanDamme demonstrated the device's motion with jokes and mnemonics, while also reflecting on the importance of astronomy. “Historically, [astronomy] is one of humanity's first sciences. They started from meticulous observation of a wide host of these things, the stars, and put it all together into theories and proofs. And it all started by paying attention to the cosmos,” he continued. “It's something anyone can do at home, right in their backyard!”

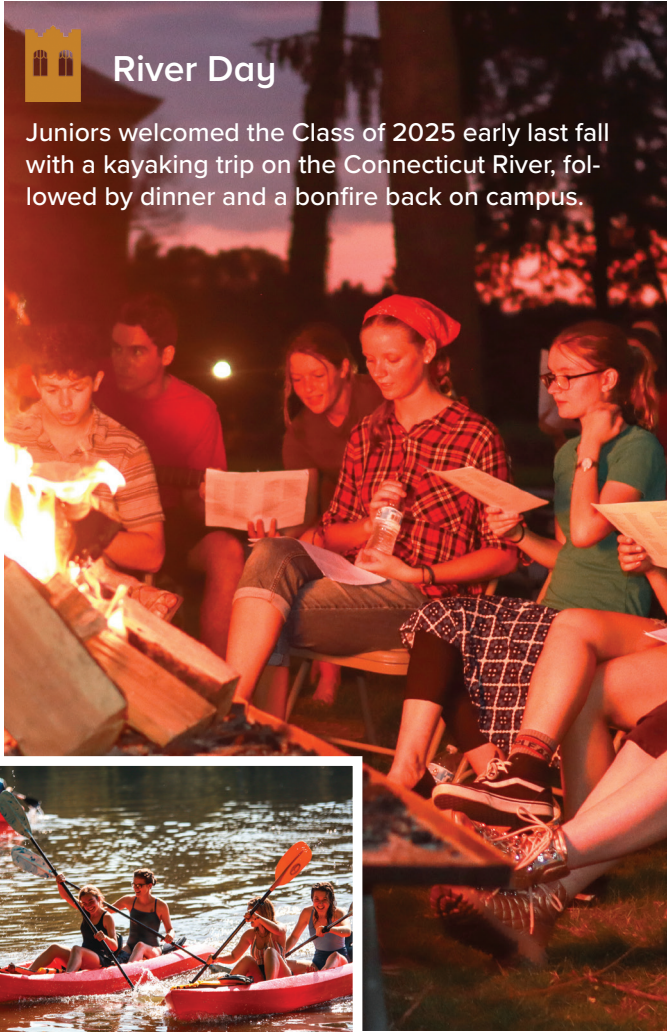
When asked about his favorite aspect of astronomy, Mr. VanDamme replied, “I love the wonder and awe it inspires. Not only that, but anywhere I am, I can figure out where most stars and planets are in the sky. I just need to know where the sun is and the time of day and — just like that — I've got it,” he grinned. “It's a wonderful trick to show friends and family.”

# Campus Life



## River Day

Juniors welcomed the Class of 2025 early last fall with a kayaking trip on the Connecticut River, followed by dinner and a bonfire back on campus.



## Halloween Dance

Sophomores turned Tracy Student Center into a haunted house for October's annual event.



## Divine Mercy Pilgrimage



Over Columbus Day weekend, Chaplain Rev. Greg Markey and some members of the National Shrine of the Divine Mercy in Stockbridge, Massachusetts...



## Winter Formal

Seniors transformed St. Joseph Commons into a winter wonderland, with faculty families joining the fun.





Some 30 students made a pilgrimage to the [unclear], for a day of prayer and reflection.



## Advent Concert

In the final days of the fall semester, the Thomas Aquinas College Choir & Orchestra performed an Advent Concert in St. Cecilia Hall, featuring music from Mozart and Bach as well as traditional Christmas songs and carols.



## All-College Seminar

Tutors and students from all classes met on a Friday evening in October to discuss T.S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*. After the seminar, students and tutors enjoyed pizza and refreshments in the Tracy Student Center.



## Turkey Bowl 2021

After a close first half, underclassmen steamrolled their way through the second, besting the upperclassmen by a final score of 40 to 19.

# Parents Serving Parents

## Meet the Members of the TAC Parents' Association Board

At the request of President Michael F. McLean, Thomas Aquinas College established its first Parents' Association Board during the 2020-2021 academic year, with Paula Cummings as its president and Nick Cammarota ('84) as vice president. Robert Bagdazian, the College's first director of alumni and parent relations, works closely with the 12-member board in fulfilling its mission, as defined in the Association's bylaws:

*The Parents' Association's general mission is to assist the College president in strengthening the wider TAC community by fostering in various ways Catholic liberal education as well as communication among the students and parents; assisting with student recruitment and retention; volunteering career and educational guidance for students and alumni of the College; and helping the College with fundraising and support for student scholarships.*

Below are short biographies of the Board's inaugural members.



### Paula Cummings

*President*

Paula Cummings brings extensive experience to her new role as president of the TAC Parents' Association, having previously served as president of the Alumni Association and a member of the Board of Trustees at her alma mater, Middlebury College. She holds an MBA from New York University and lives in New York with her husband, Alexander. The Cummings are the parents of two children, both students on the California campus.

Berquist, she has six grown children, all of whom are TAC graduates.

### Joanne Dowdy

For years Joanne Dowdy and her husband, David, lived and worked on the prep-school campus that is now the home of Thomas Aquinas College, New England. The parents of one graduate and one California student, they played an enthusiastic and prayerful role in bringing the College to Northfield, Massachusetts, and thus have been dubbed "the Godparents to TAC-New England."



### Nick Cammarota ('84)

*Vice President*

An alumnus of the College as well as the father of two TAC alumni and two students on the California campus, Nick Cammarota ('84) worked as a land-use attorney before joining the Building Industry Association of Southern California as its general counsel in 1995. He and his wife, Antonia, live in the Sacramento area.

### Andrew Emrich ('93)

Alumnus Andrew Emrich ('93) is deeply grateful for his time at the College, where he not only deepened his faith, but met his wife, Shandra ('93). The classmates are the parents of five sons, two of whom are TAC alumni. Andrew is a partner for Holland & Hart LLP in Denver, where he represents energy-sector clients.

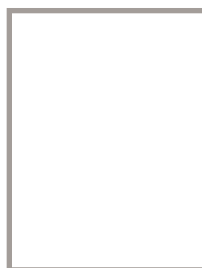


### Laura Berquist ('75)

Laura Berquist ('75) is a member of Thomas Aquinas College's first graduating class and the founder/CEO of the Mother of Divine Grace distance-learning program in Ojai, California. Along with her late husband, College co-founder Marcus R.

### Kara Guinee

A homeschooling mother of 10 — including three TAC alumni and one student on each campus — Kara Guinee hopes that, through her work on the Parents' Association Board, she can encourage prospective students and parents to come to know



the beauty and goodness of a Thomas Aquinas College education. She and her husband, John, live in Massachusetts.

### **Anne Heekin-Canedy**

Becoming a member of the Parents' Association Board is just the latest example of Anne Heekin-Canedy's deep commitment to Catholic education. A certified teacher of the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd, she is currently studying for a master's in catechesis through The Catholic University of America. Anne and her husband, Scott, are the parents of a TAC graduate and live in Connecticut.

### **Kim McCarthy**

Kim McCarthy is a teacher for Mother of Divine Grace School who previously worked on the development team for an elementary school. She loves fundraising and looks forward to working with fellow parents to raise money for TAC student scholarships. Kim is married to the College's vice president for finance, Dennis McCarthy, and their daughter is a TAC graduate.

### **Laura Ristoff**

Laura Ristoff and her husband, Tim, have three sons, the eldest of whom is a TAC alumnus. She holds a bachelor's degree in business marketing from California State University, Northridge, and a certification in human resource management from the University of California, Irvine.

She has also previously worked as an HR Manager.

### **Meg Schmitt ('90)**

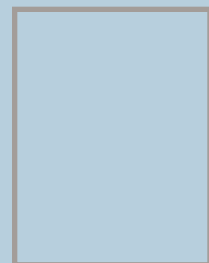
Meg and Carl Schmitt ('90) are the parents of nine children, including three TAC alumni. Meg is a veteran of the pro-life movement, co-owner of a full-service laundromat, and the managing member of a real estate company in Western Massachusetts, less than an hour's drive from the New England campus.

### **Greg Simia**

Tired with impersonal, mega-universities, Wisconsinite Greg Simia and his late wife, Sandy, sought out small, liberal-arts schools for their eight children. After doing their research, they concluded that Thomas Aquinas College was the best of them all. Two of the Simias' children have gone on to graduate from the College, and two more are currently students on the New England campus.

### **Ray Walshe**

Ray Walshe and his wife, Valerie, have two daughters: One is a TAC alumna, and one will graduate from the California campus in May. A Southern California insurance professional, Ray has a keen interest in helping TAC students realize their career potential. As a member of the Board, he hopes help them find opportunities in his industry as well as others.



**Want to connect with other TAC parents?**

Join the TAC Parents' Association Facebook Community!

Photos, updates, discussions & more!

[Facebook.com/TACParents](https://www.facebook.com/TACParents)



# Parent's Corner

## Mustard Seeds

By Mary Beth Miller

“**H**ave you heard of the Newman Guide?” This mustard seed of a question — from a friend at a Lenten supper in 2017 — has grown into quite the gift for my daughter Grace ('24) and our family.

I'm embarrassed now to admit it, but my answer that evening was, “No.” And until researching the guide's list of faithfully Catholic colleges the next day, I hadn't heard of Thomas Aquinas College, either, despite having grown up just 100 miles south of the California campus.

But as Oregon transplants since 2000, our family returns to Southern California for occasional visits. Driving home from one such trip during the Summer of 2017, I remembered — perhaps through the prompting of the Holy Spirit — the Newman Guide and TAC.

On a lark — without scheduling a campus visit and against the protest of my husband and three kids who just wanted to get home — I insisted we take a detour to see the campus. After driving through the dusty town of Santa Paula and up winding Ojai Road, we pulled into the almost-deserted parking lot.

Feeling like interlopers, we peeked into the silent chapel, walked across the empty quad, and eventually came upon a small group of students eating lunch in the Commons. We introduced ourselves, and one volunteered to find a fellow student, Isaac Cross ('18), so he could give us a tour.

Mr. Cross spent an hour showing and telling us about all things TAC: the history of the school; the program's philosophy, pedagogy, and curriculum; campus life, the classrooms, the library. It all seemed so good, and true, and beautiful. I came away feeling like TAC was perhaps the most perfect place on the planet.

Grace wasn't as convinced, but she was interested. Then, in 2019, she attended the High School Summer Program, loved it, and came home eager to apply. In a bit of a role reversal, it was then that my husband and I were the ones who needed convincing. At that point, committing to TAC required a leap of faith on our parts.

You see, we weren't the typical TAC family. Grace hadn't had a classical education, nor had she been homeschooled. My husband and I had attended UCLA, a mega-school with mega-options for majors, career pathways, research, sports, and student life. Could a college with only one major and fewer than 400 students be for real?

**“At that point, committing to TAC required a leap of faith on our parts.”**



*The Millers visit the California campus in 2017.*

Spring of 2020 was a time for choosing. It was also the time when the case for choosing TAC became crystal clear. Everything seemed upside down: the pandemic, the protests, education, our country, the world. I read TAC's founding and governing document, the Blue Book, and realized that, 50 years ago, the school's founders had anticipated and answered the problems of these times. Their answer was the moral and intellectual formation that TAC provides. Their answer was Catholic liberal education.

In August 2020 — three years after that impromptu campus visit — Grace commenced her freshman year at TAC. Almost immediately we realized that our reservations were unfounded. Anything she had given up by forgoing a mega-school was more than made up for by the tremendous gifts she was receiving at tiny TAC.

Grace is learning from the greats. She is learning how to think. She is being formed morally and intellectually for these times, as the founders intended.

At the beginning of the school year, College co-founder Peter L. DeLuca came out of retirement to teach Grace's Freshman Theology class. Grace loved him, and through his class began to love her Catholic faith more deeply, too.

“It is the smallest of all the seeds, yet when full-grown it is the largest of plants. It becomes a large bush, and the ‘birds of the sky come and dwell in its branches’” (Matt. 13:32). The power of small.

TAC is celebrating its 50<sup>th</sup> birthday this year. It's been a privilege for Grace and our family to start to open its gifts.