Surviving COVID

How Mercyhurst adapted as the pandemic evolved

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An update on the Presidential Search

As you know, Mercyhurst University is in the midst of a Presidential Search to determine its 13th president following the retirement of President Michael T. Victor.

The Board of Trustees has commissioned a search committee co-chaired by Stephen J. Fiedler ’85, treasurer of the board, and board member Atty. B. Scott Kern. The co-chairs are working in partnership with national search firm R.H. Perry & Associates and have appointed committee members to represent the university’s various constituencies.

Your representatives include:

- Sister JoAnne K. Courneen, RSM ’64, vice chair, Mercyhurst Board of Trustees
- Yvonne J. Maher ’93, vice chair, Mercyhurst Board of Trustees
- Rosemary D. Durkin ’77, secretary, Mercyhurst Board of Trustees
- John W. Saxon ’89, Trustee
- Christina M. Marsh ’88, Trustee
- Matthew W. Johnson ’99, Trustee
- Richard McCarty, president, Mercyhurst Faculty Senate
- Courtney Olevnik ’08 ’13M, president, Mercyhurst Staff Senate
- Emily Mosco Merski ’04 ’06M, president, Mercyhurst Alumni Association
- Lucy Belleau, president, Mercyhurst Student Government
- James Snyder, associate professor of philosophy
- Jodi Staniunas Hopper, associate professor of graphic design

As part of the process, we have created opportunities to engage the greater Mercyhurst community in this most important undertaking. We would like to take this opportunity to share our progress.

Many of you responded to the committee’s invitation to share your thoughts on the search. In all, we heard from more than 270 constituents who attended one of 10 forums. We want to thank everyone who took the time to provide insights into the qualities we should emphasize in our search, or to suggest potential candidates to become our next president. We are grateful for your help.

As a result of your contributions and the hard work of our committee, we have prepared The Presidential Profile, a detailed job description provided to potential candidates, which has been uploaded to our Presidential Search website at mercyhurst.edu/president. Please take a minute to peruse its contents.

At this writing, we are in full recruitment mode and later this month and into April we will narrow the search to identify our finalists. We hope to bring these finalists to campus to engage in person with our college community, but we will prepare for virtual meetings should COVID guidelines require them. If all goes according to plan, we hope to name a new president in mid-May.

We want to thank everyone who has contributed to the search process thus far, and appreciate your commitment to the continued excellence of our university. We are confident that when our search is complete, we will have identified an outstanding leader to take Mercyhurst forward.

Sincerely,

Stephen J. Fiedler ’85 | B. Scott Kern, Esq.
Search Committee Co-Chairs

ON THE COVER:

Senior Intelligence Studies major Katie Johnston models a Mercyhurst-themed mask. Katie’s also vice president of the Mercyhurst Ambassadors and a manager with the Mercyhurst Center for Applied Politics. (Photo by Jeremy Hewitt ’07)
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Surviving COVID

By Sue Corbran

When COVID-19 hit, Mercyhurst leaned in with resilience and resolve – the same way it’s faced other challenges over the past 95 years. The resilient and resolute pioneer Sisters of Mercy would have been proud.

Said former President Michael T. Victor, “Our inventiveness and creativity in tackling challenges – and the caring, hospitable, merciful environment the Sisters started – were huge strengths as we coped with this unprecedented pandemic.”

By the time students returned to campus to start spring semester on Jan. 25, Mercyhurst’s leaders had been dealing with the deadly pandemic for a full year. A Presidential Task Force started meeting in January 2020, when fewer than a half-dozen COVID cases had been detected in the U.S.

Though it would be many weeks before the coronavirus reached Erie, the challenge it posed became clear at Mercyhurst in early March. That’s when administrators made the tough call to cancel a planned trip to the university’s Dungarvan campus by 15 students and three faculty members.

Just weeks later, during a hectic few days in mid-March, Mercyhurst moved all operations online. As soon as virtual classes were up and running, the university’s COVID team immediately started devising plans to bring everyone back to campus safely in mid-August. The campus experience was different – like every other aspect of life in the age of COVID.

The break between semesters was longer than usual, but Mercyhurst leaders used the time to fine-tune their fall protocols while developing a new testing strategy. Tests before and after arrival on campus allowed Mercyhurst to start classes knowing that the “campus bubble” was as healthy as possible.
THE ONLINE PIVOT

Within three days last spring, faculty members learned the fine points of Blackboard and Teams and converted more than 1,200 class sections into online courses. Virtual support services, from academic advising to tutoring, were offered to students now scattered across the nation, and the world.

The Office of Distance Learning, the Center for Teaching Excellence, and lots of faculty volunteers mobilized to ensure that faculty members – even those who'd seldom used online tools before – were ready. The IT staff jumped in to make sure both faculty and students had access to the technology they'd need to finish out the semester, finding solutions for students who lacked computers or reliable internet service.

Provost Dr. Leanne Roberts said, “It was inspiring to watch our faculty and support services personnel turn toward one common goal. They simply turned toward each other and started moving.”

BACK IN PERSON

While the spring pivot to remote learning was quick and largely successful, the consensus was clear: if there was a way to safely bring students back to campus, that’s what we would do.

Dr. Laura Zirkle, who supervised the effort as Mercyhurst’s chief pandemic officer, noted, “It was important for Mercyhurst to be who we are. Such a big part of what Mercyhurst is comes from being together on campus.”

Countless modifications had to be made in pursuit of that goal. Special credit goes to the President and his Cabinet and members of the COVID Task Force chaired by Zirkle: Dr. Judy Smith, Sue Sweeney, Andy Simon-Wambach, Jamie Breneman, and Ryan Palm. But virtually every Mercyhurst employee was involved in some way.

Consider just a few of the tasks they confronted:

• crafting a new academic calendar to limit student travel
• analyzing every classroom on campus to set capacity limits and furniture layouts
• devising new traffic patterns throughout campus to minimize physical contact
• posting prominent signage everywhere to remind everyone how to “Curb COVID”
• upgrading technology to facilitate remote study and work
• establishing and communicating health and safety protocols
• training our own team of contract tracers to monitor any COVID cases on campus
• creating isolation and quarantine plans
• converting dining service to increase to-go options
• implementing enhanced cleaning and disinfecting strategies
• and so much more!

In the following pages, check out just a few examples of how Mercyhurst adapted during this crisis.
HEALTH AND WELLNESS

Executive Director of Wellness Dr. Judy Smith and Sue Sweeney, associate athletic director for health and wellness, led the charge to create protocols that would keep returning students as safe as possible and prevent potential spread of coronavirus on campus. Symptom screening, mask-wearing, crowd limits and physical distancing, handwashing, and enhanced cleaning were all required.

It was clear from the start that success hinged on getting students and staff to personally commit to safe behaviors. “It would only work if we could convince students and employees to make good choices and be willing to make sacrifices,” Zirkle said. A regular stream of letters, video messages, and social media posts focused on that shared responsibility.

Students were required to monitor their own symptoms, including temperatures, before venturing out each day. They were encouraged to limit close physical contact as much as possible, to remain on campus, to avoid gathering in groups. That’s a tough sell with college students, but compliance was high.

Mercyhurst assembled employees from several departments to create a Contact Response Team. Staff from Athletic Training and the Counseling Center completed training on contact tracing with Johns Hopkins University and were available around the clock to respond to potential new cases.

Residence Life staff managed quarantine and isolation areas to house students who became infected or were exposed to COVID, with meals delivered, classes and activities available online, and support just a phone call away.

A COVID hotline was created to field questions about troublesome symptoms and everything else COVID-related.

ACADEMICS

In May, Mercyhurst announced its intention to offer in-person classes in the fall, though it never stopped preparing to deal with any complication the pandemic might present.

Provost Roberts and the Office for Academic Affairs prepared the faculty to offer a full spectrum of class delivery options, from totally remote to totally in-person. The advantage, Zirkle explained, was that Mercyhurst was ready for anything. “At any moment we felt it wasn’t safe to have students in classrooms, we knew we could quickly adapt, and go 100 percent remote,” she explained. “Not only could we do what we had done in the spring, but we could do it much better.” In November, with COVID cases spiking sharply in Erie and at Mercyhurst, the university returned to virtual class delivery for the final two weeks of classes.

For most of the semester, though, Mercyhurst operated what was familiarly known as the A/B model. More formally, the centerpiece of the academic plan was dubbed the Socially Distant, Technology Enhanced, Hurst Hybrid Academic Model.

Under COVID guidelines, fewer students than usual were permitted in any classroom. The A/B plan effectively doubled the capacity of each space to accommodate larger classes. Each class day, half the students enrolled in a class attended in person, while the rest logged in via Zoom, and the two groups swapped places for the next class session. Faculty members accepted the challenge of interacting with both groups simultaneously and worked hard to keep everyone involved.

An added benefit: students who needed to isolate or quarantine could keep up with their classes virtually.

While the A/B model handled most situations, some hands-on programs had to go to even greater lengths to keep their students engaged. See how Mercyhurst’s performing and visual arts programs kept creating and performing on page 6.

ADMISSIONS

For Admissions, the challenge was stark. How do you recruit and enroll new students when your biggest selling point – the beautiful campus – is closed to visitors?

Vice President for Enrollment Joe Howard said his team had already brought in a larger-than-usual pool of applicants pre-COVID.

When the pandemic struck, his staff quickly took its whole operation online. Within days after they were sent home to work remotely, the Admissions and Marketing teams had developed and launched more than 80 virtual sessions to connect with all those prospective students.

More than 1,200 applicants attended one or more of those events, where they could interact with faculty, staff, and upperclassmen, ask questions, and learn more about everything from academic programs to campus life. Hundreds more signed up for virtual campus tours, complete with guides in their signature green Ambassador jackets.

“What’s most important is that our representatives delivered these events with the same hospitality and care as they do in-person visits,” Howard stressed.
ORIENTATION

In ordinary times, orientation for incoming freshmen involves a daylong campus visit. Since COVID restrictions prevented that, Sarah Allen, executive director of campus involvement, worked with departments across the university to orient new students virtually.

“It was quintessential Mercyhurst,” said Chief Pandemic Officer Laura Zirkle. “We connected, we engaged, we came up with a million ways to stay in touch with students and parents.”

The sometimes-overwhelming amount of information that’s usually presented at Orientation was broken down into chunks that incoming freshmen could absorb at their own pace over a two-month period.

Some sessions were mandatory. In other areas, students could choose from a variety of options. Besides the student-focused presentations, weekly sessions were offered where parents could explore topics ranging from Mercyhurst’s plans to deal with COVID to “letting go” of your college student.

“This was one of our largest freshman classes, but we helped get students engaged and connected so they could come here and succeed,“ Allen said.

STUDENT LIFE

Move-In Day took on a whole new look – not only an abundance of masks and hand sanitizer, but also limited windows for each new arrival to unload their belongings and start making their rooms feel like home. The process was so efficient that Residence Life is considering retaining some elements of it in the future.

Once on campus, students stayed within small “pods” with their neighbors. They took part in all the usual Welcome Week events but had limited contacts outside their pods. A few large group events were held outdoors, where students could spread out across the athletic fields.

There’s more to the college experience than studying, so the Campus Involvement Center was determined to get students engaged and active – with clearly defined guidelines outlined in its Event Phase Model.

As students settled in, they were invited to explore a virtual Involvement Fair on Flipgrid. Most of Mercyhurst’s 80+ student organizations remained active. Meetings and events, held virtually or under strict safety protocols, filled the weekly calendar.

Student events were offered regularly throughout the semester. “COVID forced us to think differently, but my team has been really inventive with what we can do,“ Allen said. Take Haunted Hurst. Groups of six students reserved personal tours and wore wrist bracelets that were attached 6 feet apart on a rope so they could walk safely around campus. Conferences and Events staff helped mount the event, enlisting theatre students to act out spooky Mercyhurst legends.

That kind of collaboration was crucial, Allen said. Another example: Parkhurst Dining Services, which offered virtual cooking demonstrations and assembled boxes of ingredients so students could cook along.

Despite COVID limitations, Mercyhurst staff and students carried on popular traditions virtually, from the opening Mass of the Holy Spirit to the Distinguished Speaker Series sponsored by Mercyhurst Student Government.

Allen said Mercyhurst’s students continue to impress her. “We talk about Carpe Diem; it’s part of our vocabulary. If you’re here, take every opportunity, hold on, jump in with two feet, try new things. If ever there was a year to try things, this is it,” she said.

ATHLETICS

When the Pennsylvania State Athletic Conference (PSAC) announced in July that it was canceling all fall sports competitions, Mercyhurst’s Athletics Department stepped in to provide hundreds of Laker student-athletes with opportunities to condition and train within the COVID guidelines, and eventually to begin competing with other schools that were equally committed to those COVID safety guidelines. See page 21 for more.

ALUMNI

Unable to welcome guests to campus, the Office of Alumni Engagement also turned to virtual events to engage with alumni. Alumni office staffers hosted a “Haunted Hurst” campus tour for alumni who watched from across the country, while the 2020 Homecoming celebration morphed into Homecoming from Home. See photos on page 26.
COVID-19 couldn’t derail the arts at Mercyhurst

Who better to ask to creatively problem-solve than arts faculty?

That’s a rhetorical question from Dr Christina Riley-Brown, dean of the Hafenmaier College of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences, who watched proudly as the arts faculty adapted to teaching under COVID restrictions – and did it beautifully.

“I have learned that the art faculty will always rise to the occasion,” she added. “We reminded each other frequently: This is not an ideal situation. But, there is NEVER an ideal situation – so we learned to be patient and forge ahead. Last semester, they accommodated students in every circumstance. We learned that we can still thrive.”
THEATRE

Dr. Brett D. Johnson said canceling productions was never an option for the Mercyhurst Theatre Program. Our productions are in some ways the most important thing we do, he explained. They are our laboratory. It’s where students put theory into practice. Everything they learn in Acting I and script analysis and theatre history gets put into practice through production work.

Once he determined that in-person performances weren’t feasible during fall term, he came up with a pair of alternatives that could be shared virtually.

In the lead-up to Halloween, the Theatre Program presented The Canterville Ghost over Zoom. Frequent collaborator Mary Barile adapted the Oscar Wilde classic and Johnson and his team went to work.

The eight cast members rehearsed and performed their roles without masks in separate rooms behind closed doors, equipped with new solid black backdrops and webcams. Johnson even delivered tech gear, costumes and props to students studying remotely in Mentor, Ohio, and Cranberry Township, Pennsylvania.

Johnson said the tech aspects were challenging, but it was fun figuring out how to pass objects from one actor to another, or how to make the ghost appear and disappear.

“I am really proud of what we did. We continued to fulfill our educational goals – and we gave our students the opportunity to do something they love during a very challenging time, he added.

Hundreds tuned in to watch the four productions of Ghost.

The Theatre Program experimented with a very different format for its holiday show – a radio play of A Dickens of a Carol. Barile had created the show for a traditional Mercyhurst production during Christmas season 2019, but it needed some major modifications to work in the audio drama format.

Anything that was visual now needed to be aural, Johnson pointed out. “In most theatrical productions, things that you see aid in the storytelling or convey information about the characters. Now the audience needs to hear those details, or have them narrated. You need a description to help you visualize the Ghost of Christmas Past that just appeared.

Johnson played Charles Dickens, while alumna Bethany Sulecki directed the play. It was one of the largest casts ever for a Mercyhurst production, with more than 40 people recording their parts in their homes or residence halls. Our alums were also eager for creative projects, so besides current students, we featured alumni from as far away as Texas, the Carolinas, and even Ireland, he explained.

A Dickens of a Carol was available on SoundCloud throughout the Christmas season.

DANCE

Mercyhurst’s A/B system – with half the students attending class via Zoom to keep classroom density down – just wouldn’t work for the Mercyhurst Dancers.

We had to be here in person every day, said Dance Department Chair C. Noelle Partusch. “It wasn’t easy, but I have a really amazing faculty and staff who are incredibly creative. They found ways to make it happen.

COVID restrictions limited the two danceSpace studios to just a dozen dancers each plus a faculty member. Each dancer was assigned spaces – a 6-foot section of the barre and a 12-foot square on the floor. Larger classes filled both adjoining studios, as teachers moved between them and shared demonstrations through computers.

The stage of the Mary D. Angelo Performing Arts Center – dark during the fall as live performances were canceled – was transformed into another large studio. The bare plywood stage was covered with the same surface used during dance concerts, and the space was outfitted with pipe barres, standing mirrors, and a giant TV monitor.

Dressing rooms and lockers were off limits, so students carried large bags to stow their gear during class. Masks and regular temperature checks became a way of life. Traffic patterns were modified. Studios were mopped and sanitized many times a day – often by faculty members who added these extra duties to their teaching loads while also supervising rehearsals that stretched long into the evening.

Besides classes, faculty made sure their students had the experience of performing, even though they couldn’t invite the public to watch them.

Early in the term, students began working on pieces that would ordinarily have been part of a gala, semester ending performance. For guest choreographers from across the country, that meant using Zoom to work with small groups of students.

Meanwhile, upper-level students were creating their own works for the Choreography Showcase and casting their classmates to perform.

For one weekend in October, the department converted a studio into a makeshift stage where all these dance numbers could be recorded. Vertical blinds and black curtains covered windows and mirrors, skylights were covered, and special lighting and three video cameras were installed.

Each cast in turn performed in full costume, following strict COVID guidelines. The space had to be completely sanitized before another group could take its place.

Partusch said the dancers are resilient. “I’ve told them from the beginning that this has not been easy, but I am ever so thankful that you’re not in your bedroom dancing; you are on a good, safe floor, taking classes.

Spring semester challenges include helping seniors complete their capstone projects, staging the Raw Edges choreography showcase, and advising graduating seniors as they plan for an uncertain future.
ART

Major changes were in store for the Art Department even before the pandemic erupted, pointed out Chair Jodi Stanislas Hopper. Professors Dan Burke and Tom Hubert both retired in 2020, so different instructors would be teaching in the studios they’ve overseen for decades. COVID meant the department also needed to develop new protocols to clean and sanitize artmaking spaces, to keep students safely distant, and to limit sharing of materials.

The heavily worn drafting tables in the drawing lab were replaced, and side carts to hold supplies were installed so that students could easily sanitize their work areas. In the 3D studio, nearly century-old tables topped with plywood were retired and new individual tables took their places, with separate buckets to store clay and tools.

Layouts were reconfigured to allow appropriate distance between workstations, and demonstration cameras installed. In the past, students would huddle around an instructor and teachers could grab a student’s hand to make a correction. You can’t do that now, Hopper said. “So you demonstrate under the camera. All the students can see what your hands are doing, how you’re handling the brush or pencil or charcoal, the consistency of your paint mix.

The new layouts have proved popular with students, Hopper said. All the cleaning and purging we did made the students feel ownership over their spaces, she said. “Every student had a spot and felt comfortable, which was our intention from the get go.

Instead of buying art materials in bulk, the department purchased individual art bins for students to store materials, a practice Hopper said will continue going forward. “It’s a great legacy item, something that will travel with them for their lifetime. Department faculty, including many adjunct instructors, came together over the summer to pack the bins with items for incoming students. Students also got large portfolios to store and protect their 2D projects.

While the Cummings Gallery was closed to the public in the fall, plans are underway to still hold the Patricia S. Yan’s ‘50 juried student show in the spring. Much will be presented virtually, but they hope to use the hallways of Zurn to share the winners for students to see regularly.

The creative and performing arts departments at Mercyhurst adopted a theme for the fall term that Hopper proposed. DREAMS reflected six elements that go into all artmaking: Discipline, Resilience, Empathy, Artistry, Making, and Showing. DREAMS also became the title for a collaborative project that brought together students from art education, art therapy, communication, dance, and graphic design.

Their teachers challenged them to create a dance for film production that was only possible if they worked together. Choreographers created dance pieces, while artists contributed everything from costumes and props to film editing and special effects.

MUSIC

It was clear early in the pandemic that singing and playing some musical instruments posed extra risk of transmitting the coronavirus. After a superspreader event infected dozens at a choir practice in Washington State, researchers at the University of Colorado Boulder determined that the swift spread was due to microscopic airborne particles known as aerosols.

So Dr. Nathan Hess, Mary A. Spadafor Endowed Chair of Music in the D Angelo Department of Music, knew it would take extra work to bring 60+ music majors back to campus safely in the fall. Six feet of social distance – the gold standard for most personal interactions – was nowhere near enough for some musicians.

For the Concert Choir of more than 35 members, that meant splitting the group between two locations. Half could work with director C. Thomas Brooks in Walker Recital Hall, where a music education student rehearsed vocal parts with the other half in Taylor Little Theatre. Halfway through, there would be a break to air out the rehearsal space, and the students would switch places.

The Wind and Jazz Ensembles spread throughout Walker, including the stage, the wings, and every other row of the seating space. Dr. Scott Meier conducted from a spot to the right of the stage so everyone could see him.

Unable to allow community members to visit campus, Civic Orchestra Director Jonathan Moser utilized just the strings of the orchestra and focused on repertoire that didn’t require woodwinds, brass or percussion.

Individual lessons went on, with modifications, of course. For instruments that produce no aerosols – like the piano – student and instructor could be 6 feet apart. Hess said even that distance was hard to achieve in his larger faculty studio that houses two Steinway grand pianos. But for voice and woodwind lessons, 15 feet and a plexiglass shield separated teachers and students. Whatever the situation, everyone wore masks – including some specially designed to accommodate instruments.

The ensembles weren’t able to offer public performances, but the popular Faculty Recital Series went on as scheduled using livestream technology. Only the performer and an accompanist were allowed on stage, and the only applause came from the tech crew members at the back of the auditorium.

Despite the restrictions, Hess said students were delighted to be on campus, since many of their counterparts at other schools didn’t get that opportunity. “I’m just so grateful that our faculty and administration were on board to do this, following all the safety protocols.

He added the music department still hopes to be able to share its performances with the public virtually during the spring term, adding that Louisa Jonason is preparing students for a special opera performance titled – appropriately – Magnificent Masks.
The common “hug” has become something of a lost expression of endearment, thanks to COVID-19. But it is among the top post-pandemic goals for Mercyhurst University senior Marina Boyle of Dublin, Ireland, who has had her fair share of brushes with the virus in the past year.

“The Irish are very warm people,” she said. “When this is all over, I can’t wait to give everyone I know a huge hug.”

As an international student, Marina was required to quarantine for 14 days on the North East campus before starting classes last fall. That did little to vanquish her Irish charm and optimism.

“Many schools were completely remote in the fall,” she said. “Knowing that Mercyhurst was making every effort to get us back on campus safely was the light at the end of the tunnel.”

Like most Mercyhurst students, Marina adapted well to the new academic regimen, the masking, social distancing, and other limitations. And yet, for all the well-executed safety measures taken by the university, and her compliance with them, Marina got COVID-19.

It was just before the end of fall semester and her return to Dublin for the holidays.

As a resident assistant, Marina interacts with students daily, so when a colleague tested positive for the virus, Marina took the test and realized the same result. But she wasn’t scared. Her sister, 2013 Mercyhurst alumna Rhona Boyle, who studied pre-med here and is now a junior doctor in Aberdeen, Scotland, contracted the virus on the job last May, as did her husband, James Foxton.

“At the time, the virus was still quite new and, naturally, my family was worried,” Marina remembered. “But, thankfully, Rhona had a relatively mild case and recovered quickly.”

Fortunately for Marina, her physical symptoms were likewise moderate. It was the mental and emotional consequences of dealing with the disease that challenged her most.

Quarantining, which obviously constrained Marina’s interactions for those 14 days last fall, was nothing compared to the restrictions of isolating with the virus. She was relegated to the confines of her townhouse, primarily to the 140 square feet that was her bedroom.

But, again, her tolerance prevailed.

“I tried to keep a positive attitude, no matter what happened, and to use my time wisely,” she said. “If I was quarantined or isolated, I saw it as a unique opportunity to slow down, take time to call friends and family, and focus on helpful tasks like improving a skill, applying for jobs, or networking.”

Marina also said she found solidarity among the Mercyhurst community. “Many of us who experienced quarantine or were unfortunate enough to contract the virus supported one another,” she said. “During those times, the special community and mission we have here at Mercyhurst was more important than ever.”

When all is said and done, Marina hopes to use her degree in business and competitive intelligence to pursue a career in a travel-related industry. She’s also eager to meet new people, but not before doling out lots of hugs to friends and family.
Reflections on the Victor presidency

By Deborah W. Morton

Six years ago when Michael Victor took office as Mercyhurst University’s 12th president, an employee was overheard remarking: “This is like The Wizard of Oz transition from black and white to Technicolor – a brilliant moment in history.”

The university came alive, many agree, as collaborative and innovative leadership at all levels created transformative change marked by enrollment growth, including record highs; streamlined administrative and academic operations; expansion of niche programs and development of innovative new programs like cybersecurity, cyber risk management, and integrative nursing leadership; new and enhanced campus facilities; and a growing national reputation for academic quality.

Calling it the most gratifying experience of his professional career, Victor concluded his tenure last month, confident that he left the university in a far better place than he found it in 2015.

Victor is the first to say that he did not accomplish anything alone. He has repeatedly acknowledged the hard work of his Cabinet, chief administrators, and other key employees. In fact, his time at Mercyhurst only served to further validate his longstanding belief that a leader must pick good people and let them do their jobs.

As a connected community of students, faculty, staff, alumni, parents, and Sisters, I believe we have made the right choices for this extraordinary institution and that our work during these past six years will stand as a legacy for years to come, he said.

Just this past year, despite the challenges of COVID-19, Mercyhurst experienced a 14 percent gain in new freshman enrollment and a historic 50 percent increase in graduate enrollment.

Among the more significant capital improvements of the Victor Administration are the new sophomore residence, Ryan Hall, named in honor of prolific Mercyhurst donors David and Ellen Hammond Ryan ’64; renovation of Grotto Commons dining hall; construction of the...
Cyber Education Center; The Roost Irish pub; and a main-floor facelift of the university’s library featuring built-in glass display cases containing historic artifacts from the Thomas J. and Michele Ridge Archival Collection.

Victor also oversaw the university’s first-ever capital campaign for athletics, which succeeded not only in meeting its goal of $9.5 million, but in exceeding it by $500,000, making possible significant renovations to nearly all of the university’s athletic facilities.

Mercyhurst witnessed gains in its reputational standing among higher education institutions, most recently being recognized in the top third (#38) of the 135 top-tier Regional Universities in the North by U.S. News & World Report. During the Victor administration, Mercyhurst was named a Purple Heart University for its commitment to veterans and their families, a likely contributor to the university’s additional U.S. News ranking at #18 among “Best Schools for Veterans,” and earned a #48 ranking in the category of “Best Value Schools.”

Victor’s administration introduced the REACH Curriculum, a streamlined and more flexible liberal arts core; replaced the term system with semesters; advanced the mission of the Mercyhurst Institute for Arts & Culture (MIAC) in offering accessible and affordable entertainment to the Erie community; and introduced new traditions like Hurst Day and The 501, a unique fundraising arm of MIAC.

While Mercyhurst University has always been a place where close connections can be fostered, when chosen, it is easy to get lost in the day-to-day busyness of academic life. Hurst Day impressed upon us the good of connecting together through recreation – not only as fellow faculty, staff, and administration, but also in our relationship with students, said Faculty Senate President Dr. Rich McCarty. “I am also especially appreciative of President Victor’s support of MIAC. With his advocacy and participation on the advisory board, President Victor identified the need to revolutionize this forward-facing institution. MIAC is now a crown jewel at Mercyhurst University and a regional asset of the performing arts.

With the absence of any Sister of Mercy working full time at the university, Victor was committed to sustaining the Mercy legacy and supported the establishment of the Mercy Emissary Program toward that end. He also ushered in new initiatives designed to promote diversity and inclusion on campus.

During Victor’s tenure, Mercyhurst made great strides in fundraising, including the largest alumni donation in history: $4 million from William and Betsy Hirt Vorsheck ’77; Mrs. Vorsheck also contributed $1.25 million to establish the F.W. Hirt Erie Insurance Risk Management Program at Mercyhurst. Other memorable contributions include $1.5 million from philanthropist and historic preservationist Thomas B. Hagen, for whom the university named its history department; and $1.5 million from John
Saxon '89 and his wife Patty Kaliszak Saxon '91, after whom the university christened "Saxon Stadium. The university also obtained the Kern House, a presidential residence at 3906 State Street in Erie, through a gift from local philanthropists Bruce and Nancy Kern.

A former business student of Victor's and successful entrepreneur Brian DeFrancesco '06, now a Trustee, traveled from his home in Orange County, California, one day to have lunch with the president. It was that reunion that resulted in DeFrancesco donating the funds necessary to complete renovations to the university's library.

"Seeing him devote his time to higher education and to lead and inspire students when he could have easily retired after his successful business career was a great example of how not to define success from what you achieve in business alone, but by how you give back and inspire others," DeFrancesco said at the time.

Significant contributions also came from Big Four accounting firm PricewaterhouseCoopers in support of a revolutionary Cyber Autism Pilot Program intended to prepare students of the Autism Initiative at Mercyhurst for careers in the burgeoning cybersecurity industry.

While Victor's commitment to the university went deep, it was also spectacular on its surface. The concept of deferred maintenance was unacceptable; he insisted on beauty at every turn. In fact, he truly believed, "When parents see how well we nurture our flowers, then they will know how dedicated we are to caring for their children."

He also brought back the long-retired carillon as a staple of campus charm, installed a 30-foot artificial Christmas tree in the Mary Garden to heighten holiday spirit, and introduced Hurst Day as an annual tradition devoted to collegial camaraderie.

Victor is all about traditions and the relationships they engender. It's the stuff of memories, agreed Mercyhurst Student Government President Lucienne Belleau, who said, "The relationship President Victor has fostered between himself and the students of Mercyhurst is truly remarkable. His presence is felt throughout all areas of our campus and he has had an immense impact on our campus culture and Mercyhurst traditions that we students are unlikely to forget."

Indeed, Victor's leadership observed the holistic integration of physical, mental, and spiritual components, creating an environment that would not only engage the mind but nurture the spirit.

"Simply put, President Victor revitalized our campus," said Staff Senate President Courtney Olevni '08 '13M. "He brought a sense of controlled urgency to the many facets that needed his immediate attention, but was laser-focused on increasing the morale of the students, staff, and faculty.

In many ways, his influence extended well beyond the Mercyhurst gates.

He encouraged service learning opportunities and partnerships that would enrich both Mercyhurst students and residents of the greater Erie community. Among them, for example, are those with local school districts, the most recent of which is a $5 million state grant to operate after-school enrichment programs for young children and their families.

Long known for its Fourth of July celebrations on campus, which ultimately became too large to sustain safely, Mercyhurst partnered with the city of Erie to restore a major community fireworks display, this time over the Erie Bayfront. Their joint effort became known as "Lights over Lake Erie."

Recognizing a need for health care programs both locally and nationally, Mercyhurst announced a multi-year plan designed to strengthen and expand its two- and four year health care degree programs. The plan involves a multi-million-dollar investment in facilities upgrades on the Erie campus, while relocating all academic programs from its North East campus to Erie by June 2021. Negotiations to sell the North East property continue at this writing.

In looking toward the future, Victor said, "Over the years, leaders will come and go; Mercyhurst University will endure. In today's competitive higher education environment, universities that are timid in the face of change will wither and die. Mercyhurst has changed in many ways since I took office in 2015, evolving and innovating to better meet the needs of our students, faculty, and staff. We know, now more than ever, what we must do to thrive."

Mercyhurst Board of Trustees Chair Joseph G. NeCastro '78 echoed similar sentiments: "As we begin this transition in the university's leadership, it is important to remember Mercyhurst is stronger today than at any time in our 94-year history. We owe a debt of gratitude to President Victor for his years of dedicated service to the university and the transformative results of his leadership."
Four elected to Board of Trustees

Four Mercyhurst alumni have been elected to the university’s Board of Trustees. Brian DeFrancesco ’06 was named in October 2019, while Dario Cipriano ’74, Ryan Gibson ’05, and Marc McAndrew ’88 were elected in February 2020.

Brian DeFrancesco is a successful entrepreneur and business executive with a passion for technology and innovation. As CEO, DeFrancesco led two companies from inception to successful exit acquisitions totaling nearly $100 million in value. DeFrancesco currently serves as the President of SMET Ventures, a business investment and technology consulting firm, and oversees a charitable foundation he founded to empower people to enhance their well-being and overcome hardship.

A native of Chardon, Ohio, he graduated from Mercyhurst in 2006 with a bachelor’s degree in business finance and a minor in computer systems. While attending Mercyhurst, he was an Ambassador and president of Delta Mu Delta business honor society. He and his wife, Jessica, have two children and reside in Orange County, California.

Dario Cipriani was a longtime partner at the Historic Square Insurance Agency in Erie and still works part time as a producer for the firm. He is a longstanding member of the Mercyhurst President’s Associates and has regularly served on board committees.

One of the first student-athletes recruited to play a varsity sport after Mercyhurst went coed, he was part of the original golf team and served as sports editor for the Merciad. He was inducted into the Mercyhurst Athletics Hall of Fame in 2001 and has served on the Hall of Fame Committee for many years. He continues to be an avid fan of Laker athletics.

He earned a degree in Management in 1974. He and his wife, Donna, live in Erie. They are the parents of a grown daughter and have two grandchildren.

Ryan Gibson co-founded and serves as Chief Investment Officer for Spartan Investment Group, LLC, a real estate investment company that specializes in finding self-storage and residential development investments. He previously worked as an airline pilot while growing his investment business.

He earned his Mercyhurst degree in Management, Marketing, and Advertising in 2005. During his student years, he competed with the varsity rowing team and served as an Ambassador.

His wife, Jackie Kerper Gibson ’05, is Director of Operations for Spartan Investment Group. The Gibsons live in Seattle with their two children.

Marc McAndrew is the Executive Vice President for Real Estate for PNC Bank. He travels extensively in this role, overseeing capital raising and lending operations nationwide.

He has served as a President’s Associate for more than a decade and was previously a member of the Advisory Board for the Walker School of Business.

He is a 1988 Mercyhurst graduate with a degree in Management. He and his wife, Michelle, live in the Pittsburgh area. They are the parents of two grown children.

He has honored his father, longtime English faculty member and sports announcer P. Barry McAndrew, by helping to endow the P. Barry McAndrew Essay in Literature Award, presented annually by the English Department, and by contributing to the Laker for Life Capital Campaign to rename the press box at Saxon Stadium in his honor.
Military pilot soars toward career in teaching via Mercyhurst

As a flight instructor, U.S. Marine Corps pilot with two tours in Afghanistan, and first officer for American Airlines, Michael Whiteford doesn’t stray far from the cockpit these days. But that could change once he earns his master’s degree in Secondary Education from Mercyhurst University, where he is the first student to participate in the Troops to Teachers (TTT) program at the university.

Mercyhurst is one of only three universities in Pennsylvania approved as host schools for Troops to Teachers, which was established in 1993 to assist transitioning service members and veterans in beginning new careers as K-12 teachers in public, charter, and Bureau of Indian Affairs schools. Mercyhurst is also designated as a Purple Heart University, one of only two in Pennsylvania, for its level of services for veterans.

“These men and women put their lives at risk on our behalf while serving our country, and we owe them an enormous debt of gratitude,” said former Mercyhurst President Michael T. Victor. “Mercyhurst is eager to do its part in ensuring their successful integration into life beyond the military.”

“With a nationwide teacher shortage looming and thousands of veterans looking for job opportunities, this initiative could not have come at a better time,” said Mercyhurst TTT Coordinator and Chair of Graduate Secondary Education Dr. Amy Burniston, who reported that six students began the program in Fall 2020 and several more started during the spring semester when the university enacted a special tuition rate for all TTT participants. They are charged $515 per credit, rather than the standard $830 per credit, a savings of 38 percent, reported Travis Lindahl, director of Graduate and Professional Admissions at Mercyhurst.

The Mercyhurst program, he continued, is a one-year Master of Science in Secondary Education degree leading to Pennsylvania Department of Education certification in either math, physics, general science, earth science, biology, chemistry, English, or social studies.

The Mercyhurst program is fully online, and the university considers an applicant’s entire career in offering life experience credit, which reduces the timeline to program completion and affords a higher degree of flexibility to balance work and family life.

And that’s what piqued the interest of Whiteford, an Allentown resident who is juggling many responsibilities, including a commercial aviation career, his obligation as a pilot with the military reserves, and his family, including his wife and three children, ages 2, 4, and 6.

For Whiteford, a career in education is a long time coming. Since his youth, he considered teaching a natural calling, following in the footsteps of his father, who taught high school for 40 years.

But then, 9/11 happened. It was his junior year in college. He was pursuing a degree in social studies education and had already done his student teaching. But, after 9/11, he chose to serve, and joined the U.S. Marine Corps. He had only planned to serve a brief time, but 13 years quickly came and went.

It was then that his career as a pilot began and, once retired from active duty, it seemed a natural path to resume, so he pursued commercial aviation. Still, he had that hankering to teach and, upon discovering Troops for Teachers, knew that it was an opportunity he had to seize.

Erie native Connor Baughman, who is presently holding a full-time substitute position at Meadville Area Senior High School, began his master’s degree in Secondary Education at Mercyhurst in 2017, but was commissioned by the Marine Corps before finishing. After two-and-a-half years of active duty and currently a reservist, Baughman said the transition from military life back to his educational path has been “seamless.”

He said the TTT program affords him not only the flexibility to balance his many duties – teaching, serving in the reserves, and taking classes – but it provides a high level of support.

For more information, contact Amy Burniston at aburniston@mercyhurst.edu or tttpennsylvania@j2tinfo.com.
New Cyber-Autism initiative combines elements of two successful programs

85% – The unemployment rate for individuals on the autism spectrum
3.5 million – The number of unfilled cybersecurity jobs (per Cybersecurity Ventures)

There’s much research about the capacity of people with high-functioning autism to satisfy the demands of many careers in the cybersecurity industry. Their strengths include cognitive pattern recognition, attention to detail, logical and methodical thinking, focus, and integrity.

Despite this documented correlation, few, if any, have capitalized on this opportunity – until now.

Mercyhurst University, in collaboration with PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC), is on the cusp of launching a first-of-its-kind Cyber-Autism Pilot Program to capitalize on the skills of students on the spectrum and prepare them for jobs in the cybersecurity realm, thereby helping to satisfy a pressing, global need.

The Cyber-Autism Pilot Program blends the strengths of the award-winning Autism Initiative at Mercyhurst (AIM) and the university’s flourishing cybersecurity program. PwC is providing seed funding for the initiative and internship opportunities for students in the cohort.

Mercyhurst developed the new program based on the success of similar international models. Faced with daunting shortages of trained cybersecurity professionals, countries around the world – including England, Australia, and Israel – have begun to tap nontraditional pools of talent to fill these vital jobs.

As a model and a resource for universities across the country, AIM has also been selected by the White House to provide support in developing neurodiversity in the cybersecurity field for federal agencies.

University officials believe this new program will shift the paradigm in how corporate America thinks about hiring and employing individuals on the autism spectrum.

AIM Director Brad McGarry was equally enthused. “I am very excited that our longstanding partnership with PwC has evolved to bring this fantastic collaboration to light,” McGarry said. “Since 2015, AIM students have participated in vocational exposure experiences at PwC in New York City and Tysons Corner, Virginia, and this new venture will better prepare and position our AIM students for sustainable and meaningful employment, especially in the cybersecurity field.”

Mercyhurst’s cybersecurity initiative, meanwhile, hosts a four-year undergraduate major and graduate program within the Ridge College of Intelligence Studies and Applied Sciences. The Ridge College is the oldest and largest school of intelligence studies in the United States.
Peace Corps mission resonates with Mercyhurst graduates

The Peace Corps describes itself as “a service opportunity for motivated changemakers to immerse themselves in a community abroad, working side by side with local leaders to tackle the most pressing challenges of our generation.”

For Mercyhurst graduates who have absorbed the commitment to service of the founding Sisters of Mercy, it’s an appealing message. According to the Peace Corps, at least 47 Mercyhurst alumni have joined the Peace Corps since its founding.

Sen. John F. Kennedy first proposed the concept of a Youth Peace Corps during his campaign for the presidency in 1960. After debating Vice President Richard Nixon on Oct. 13, Kennedy arrived very late at the University of Michigan.

Pulling in around 2 a.m., he found an estimated 10,000 students waiting to hear him speak. They responded enthusiastically to his suggestion that young people could serve their country and the cause of freedom by living and working in developing countries for years at a time.

After his November win, President Kennedy created the Peace Corps on March 1, 1961. In the years since, more than 240,000 volunteers have accepted the challenge and served in more than 141 countries.

When 2020 began, more than 7,000 young Americans were volunteering with the Peace Corps in 60+ countries around the world and the agency was gearing up for a yearlong celebration of its 60th anniversary.

Then COVID struck, forcing it to quickly suspend operations and bring everyone home. Leaders hope to have most volunteers back in service in their host countries by the end of 2021.

We asked several Mercyhurst volunteers to tell us about their experiences, including a few recent graduates whose service was cut short by the pandemic.

MAGGIE SWITZER ‘16

Margaret Maggie Switzer was just months from the end of her Peace Corps assignment in Peru when COVID reared its ugly head. Evacuated March 21, 2020, she had to board a flight home with only the clothes on her back and the few possessions she had taken with her to a conference in Lima.

She had spent the past two years in Amazonas, in Peru’s northern highlands, as a Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) volunteer. She worked with the local government, health clinics, schools and other community leaders to ensure the availability of safe drinking water and to promote healthy practices like hand-washing.

The Peace Corps – with its blend of service, learning about other cultures, and discovering new places – had been on Maggie’s radar since high school. But after earning her Mercyhurst degree in social work in 2016, she first spent a year with AmeriCorps, developing skills like capacity building and community organizing that served her well when she headed to South America.

Maggie said her education at Mercyhurst prepared her well for her work in both AmeriCorps and the Peace Corps. In particular, she recalls her service-learning trip to Guyana, South America. “I learned what it was to work alongside local community members that want to make positive change, she explained. The trip allowed me the opportunity to engage in culture sharing and connecting with people from very different backgrounds.

Discussions of issues like social justice with professors and fellow students also helped her rethink and challenge her view of the world. “I believe that my time at Mercyhurst and the Peace Corps helped prepare me to become a more thoughtful global citizen, she said.

Maggie always planned to pursue a graduate degree after her Peace Corps tenure; she even took the GRE and submitted applications from Peru. “I was lucky in that I returned to the U.S. with a plan of action, albeit a few months earlier than anticipated. Now I’m at Emory University in Atlanta pursuing my master’s in public health and we’ll see where life takes me next.

One thing is definitely on the agenda: a return trip to Peru as soon as it’s safe to travel there. “I was very close with my host family and community and I’d like to have the chance to see them again and have a proper goodbye. 
**ANNE SCHLEICHER**

Ann Schleicher earned a philosophy degree at Pitt in 1993 and then an English education degree at Mercyhurst in 1995. She went on to teach English at Erie’s Villa Maria Academy for three years.

Though she’d always been attracted to the Peace Corps, she wasn’t sure her background made her a good candidate. “I thought that they wanted engineers and farmers and individuals with more technical experience than I had, she said. “I wasn’t sure what I had to offer.

But she knew she wanted the adventure of traveling to a new country and experiencing new peoples and cultures, and she felt a strong obligation to give back, so she applied anyway. From 1999 to 2001, she worked as a TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language) teacher in Darkhan, the second largest city in Northern Mongolia. She taught students from kindergarten to grade 12, who appreciated having a native speaker to teach them English.

She added that working with her Mongolian counterparts who taught Russian and English was especially fulfilling. “It allowed me to help them improve their own English and pedagogical skills, and it felt like something that could be sustained after I left.

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**NADIA POWELL HUSTY**

Studying abroad in London as a Mercyhurst student gave Nadia Powell her first taste of living overseas. As she neared graduation with a degree in communication, she decided she wanted to see more of the world before settling into an office job. “I also loved the idea of a big challenge, immersing myself in a new culture, and possibly making a real difference,” she explained.

When her assignment to Bulgaria arrived, she had to turn to an atlas to discover just where she was headed. She discovered she’d live and work in Rousse, a small town on the banks of the Danube River at the far northeastern tip of the Balkan nation. From 2003 to 2005, she taught English in grades 7-11 during the school year and art classes at a girls’ orphanage in the summer months.

Reflecting on her decision to join the Peace Corps, Nadia recalled, “I remember one extra snowy night. There was a slam poetry competition at the student union and I decided to sign up last minute. I didn’t tell any of my friends, just did it. And I won! Peace Corps was kind of like that. I just went for it. And I went in thinking I might have a chance to make an impact on the world, or someone, or something.

“But the truth is, it made a bigger impact on me than anything else I’ve gone on to do. I still can’t believe that somewhere in my brain is a language with another alphabet. Fifteen years later, it still feels like home.”

Nadia now lives in Potomac, Maryland, with her husband, Joe Husty, and their beloved French Bulldog, Hank. She works as Mid-Atlantic Marketing Director for a large commercial real estate firm.

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**KARL GUSTAFSON**

Karl Gustafson had lived and worked abroad before enrolling in Mercyhurst’s graduate program in applied intelligence in 2011. His goal was to combine his overseas experience and a Mercyhurst education to work with the U.S. State Department.

Instead, he shipped out with the Peace Corps just a month after completing his master’s degree. After two months of intensive Chinese language training, he was assigned to teach college-level classes in English and American culture at a university in Sichuan province, China.

His university sat on the outskirts of Chengdu, a city of some 15 million people that he described as “not optimal” due to noise, air pollution and constant construction. His experience at the university was great, though. Discovering that his students were fascinated by the lives of American college students and Western popular culture, he incorporated American films and TV shows into his lessons. He even organized outdoor film nights at which he screened the great American classics of the ‘90s – basically anything starring Adam Sandler, Chris Farley or Jim Carrey.

During breaks, Karl relished the opportunity to travel.

Karl said skills developed in his master’s program – designed to help people discover solutions and adapt to fluid conditions – easily translated to working abroad in a new and extremely different environment.

Since returning to America in 2015, he’s worked with the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, first in Chicago and more recently in Washington, D.C. As part of the Field Litigation Team, he collects, reviews and analyzes evidence to be used in potential consumer protection litigation. “Basically just a long way of saying that I try to make life difficult for bad banks, he added.

Karl’s Peace Corps experiences also provided raw material for a book he published in 2020. *Fast Train Home*, written under the pen name Gus Karlson, is described as part memoir, part philosophical rumination on the meaning and importance of travel and the value of strange experiences. It’s available in Kindle and paperback formats at amazon.com.
ELEANOR HEIN '18

Ele Hein majored in hospitality management and minored in anthropology/archaeology at Mercyhurst but chose to gain global experience through service before beginning a career in either field. She joined the Peace Corps just months after graduation.

She was assigned as an English Literacy Facilitator in Tonga, a tiny island nation southeast of Fiji in the South Pacific. Her job was to teach English as a Second Language in a primary school, while also developing sustainable activities and materials that the school could use after she left.

Ele was also active with the Peer Support and Diversity Network, organizing events to improve peer support among Peace Corps volunteers and advocating for marginalized volunteers.

Like volunteers around the world, she had her service cut short by COVID-19. With just a day or two to pack up and say goodbye to her Tongan friends and coworkers, she headed to the capital city of Nuku alofa and boarded the last flight out to Fiji before Tonga closed its borders. Within a week she was back home in the United States. (Ironically, Tonga is one of just a few nations in the world that had not recorded a single case of COVID-19 through Nov. 12, 2020.)

The core values of Mercyhurst seem to be a recurring theme in all that I do, Ele reflected. She particularly credited an ethics class with Dr. Richard McCarty that she said helped her to be reflectively aware of everything she did during her Peace Corps assignment and the impacts of her actions.

I have done a lot of work both while in Tonga and since coming back to hold Peace Corps accountable to living up to its mission of creating sustainable locally led solutions to problems in the countries where it sends its volunteers, she added.

I hope that, ultimately, because of these combined experiences, I have come to be a better advocate and ally – in thoughts and in actions – than I was before, and that I can truly live up to the values set by the Sisters of Mercy, Ele said.

In February, she started a new position as a landscape preservation fellow at the Museum at Bethel Woods, a museum on the historic grounds of the original Woodstock Festival. “I am excited to pursue my dream of working in museum administration in a position that will combine my fields of study (hospitality and archaeology), she said.

NATALIA JOSEPH '19

A Peace Corps posting to Ukraine was a perfect fit for Natalia Joseph, who had focused on the region as an undergraduate at Mercyhurst and completed a senior thesis project with Ukrainian immigrants to Erie.

She joined the Peace Corps immediately following graduation. “I wanted to experience firsthand what can come from living, learning, and assisting those in places so drastically different from where I live,” she said. “I am also passionate about grassroots organizations that provide more immediate and crucial help that local citizens want, which can provide culturally conscious assistance instead of generalized aid.”

For about seven months, Natalia taught English to children in grades 3-10 and ran English-language clubs for young children, high school students, and the community. Her home base was Mohyliv-Podilskyi, a town on Ukraine’s border with Moldova.

When COVID-19 began exploding across Europe, her Peace Corps assignment came to a premature end.

Natalia was a 14-hour train ride away from home when she learned Peace Corps staffers and volunteers might be evacuated. She had traveled to Kyiv to help write a national English exam for a foreign language competition, then on to Kharkiv to visit Mikhail (Misha) Buryak. Misha spent a semester at Mercyhurst in 2017 as a UGRAD exchange student and helped Natalia, a Russian major and president of the Russian Club, practice the language.

“I had 24 hours to get a train back to Mohyliv-Podilskyi, gather my things, say a rushed goodbye to my amazing host family and colleagues, and get back to Kyiv ready to fly back to America,” Natalia said. She made it there in time, but then faced at least seven flight cancellations over the next four days as Ukraine began shutting down international travel. Eventually, they were able to fly home – and head immediately into quarantine.

Natalia applied to graduate programs during her two week quarantine at a Cleveland hotel and earned an acceptance to the University of Chicago’s Committee on International Relations. She plans to study international development and, though she won’t return to the Peace Corps, hopes to continue working on issues surrounding Russia and Ukraine in her future career.

“I am thankful to the Peace Corps, as well as the World Languages and Anthropology Departments at Mercyhurst, for preparing me to succeed in another country and culture... Living in another culture for an extended time was difficult yet extremely rewarding. I wouldn’t change my experience, even knowing how it ended.”
HEATHER RICHMOND  '03

The Mercy tradition of service and involvement in groups like Rotaract Club and Habitat for Humanity combined to shape Heather Richmond’s life in the years after she earned her business degree. “I believe Mercyhurst and my experiences really deepened values of compassion, selflessness, and helping others,” she said.

Mercyhurst courses exposed her to global perspectives and issues of social injustice and poverty. This helped me appreciate how fortunate I was (and continue to be) and acknowledge that much of my well-being really started with where I was born, which came with an abundance of support, resources, and opportunities,” she added.

Heather can pinpoint the moment she decided to do a year of service: Dr. Mary Hembrow.

Assigned to the Community Outreach Program of the University of Southern Philippines Foundation in Cebu City, she lived and worked in a barangay (village) called Bacayan. She focused on the Women’s Livelihood Foundation in Cebu City, she lived and worked in a barangay (village) called Bacayan. She worked to bridge the gap in the middle. The degree he Peace Corps service took her in a different direction than her undergraduate study, she found her science background very helpful as she pursued her M.S. in policy.

Heather met her husband, Oscar, who is Filipino, while she was studying in Japan as a Rotary World Peace Fellow. They settled in Manila in 2012. Until last fall, Heather worked at Innovations for Poverty Action (IPA), an organization that promotes effective solutions to global poverty problems. She has overseen projects across many sectors, including Peace & Recovery, Microfinance, Financial Inclusion, Youth Workforce Development, and Judicial Reform.

She and Oscar have a 3-year-old daughter and a 5-year old son. The family is hoping to relocate to the United States in the near future.

PATRICK SCHERER  '11

Patrick Scherer majored in international business and minored in Asian Studies at Mercyhurst. He went to work for Citibank after graduation, but soon realized he wanted to gain some international work experience and also to serve others.

Memories of a Peace Corps information session he attended with a friend, as well as a conversation with a Returned Peace Corps Volunteer, suggested a way to accomplish both aims.

Patrick served from 2012 to 2014 in Uganda, where he worked with a small rural savings and credit cooperative to provide financial literacy education. He also helped to establish a coffee cooperative in the community where he was based.

In addition, his team conducted youth camps, teaching children 10-16 years old about financial literacy, leadership, and prevention of diseases like HIV/AIDS and malaria.

He said his time at Mercyhurst prepared him in many ways for his Peace Corps work. “I went into my service with a sense of compassion and desire to serve others, based on the Sisters of Mercy mission and the many community service opportunities Mercyhurst offered during my time on campus,” he explained. “I also went in with a unique global perspective and understanding that I acquired from the friendships I made with the many international students on campus as well as from a study abroad trip to China.”

Married to fellow Mercyhurst graduate Tracy Kleinhenz ’12, Patrick works now as a change management consultant with clients in the commercial construction industry. Patrick and Tracy live in Charlotte, North Carolina, with their infant son, Gray.

ASHLEY WESTGATE  '12

Ashley Westgate majored in biochemistry and went on to complete graduate work in environmental policy. During her graduate work, she volunteered in the Peace Corps as a Coastal Resource Management Extension worker in the Philippines. Working with a local government unit in a rural community, she developed policies, held meetings, and eventually wrote a management plan for a 400-hectare coral reef.

Though her Peace Corps service took her in a different direction than her undergraduate study, she found her science background very helpful as she pursued her M.S. in policy.

We worked comprehensively on policy issues and worked to bridge the gap between policymakers and scientists,” she explained. “Simply, policymakers don’t often understand science language and scientists aren’t able to translate their work to policy. We did the work to bridge the gap in the middle. The degree from Mercyhurst helped me to understand scientific work and apply it to the real world.

Back in the States now, Ashley works for ServErie, an Erie nonprofit driven by volunteers that helps connect people in need to resources. “I apply much of the knowledge from the Peace Corps, undergrad and grad school to address systemic poverty in our area,” she said.
Laker for Life campaign surpasses $9.5 million goal

The Laker for Life campaign launched in 2019 as a transformative force for Mercyhurst Athletics programs and the student-athlete experience.

William and Betsy Hirt Vorsheck, along with John and Patty Kaliszak Saxon, kicked off the campaign with donations of $4 million and $1 million respectively. In less than two years, the Laker for Life campaign has exceeded its $9.5 million goal and has already changed the face of multiple Mercyhurst athletic programs and facilities.

Upgrades have been completed to Saxon Stadium, the baseball/soccer field, and the Mercyhurst Ice Center. Up next: completion of a new turf field for Mercyhurst softball and improvements to the Mercyhurst Athletic Center.

The generosity of our alumni, friends and fans has been overwhelming, said Director of Athletics Brad Davis. The gifts to the Laker for Life campaign have helped us chart a new course and realize the new vision for Laker athletics quickly.

The upgrades to athletic facilities are already apparent. Saxon Stadium has a new synthetic turf field surface, as well as LED lighting to help extend practice and competition options. The baseball and soccer field also received a new synthetic playing surface, plus expanded bullpens and dugouts.

The Mercyhurst Ice Center got a facelift with new boards, glass, flooring, a fresh coat of paint and new graphics. The Ice Center's cooling system was upgraded for the first time since the facility opened in 1991. New locker room spaces were added to house the Mercyhurst softball and women's soccer teams, as well as locker rooms to improve the experience of visiting teams and local teams using Mercyhurst facilities.

Although construction has been slowed by COVID-19, ground has been broken on a third synthetic turf field in partnership with Mercyhurst Preparatory School. Construction will resume this spring on the new field, which will provide a home for Mercyhurst softball as well as for Mercyhurst Preps soccer and softball teams. It will also serve as an additional practice facility for Laker field hockey, lacrosse, and soccer.

Also slated for improvements this summer is the Mercyhurst Athletic Center. Upgrades to the gym floor, seating, and scoreboards are planned, with completion scheduled for this September.

The success of the Laker for Life campaign is a testament to Mercyhurst’s continued commitment to provide a first class experience for Laker student-athletes.

Senior Class Gift to honor Kenny Robinson’s legacy

Kenny Robinson had an infectious smile and indomitable spirit. He left his mark on the baseball program and the whole university community during his time at Mercyhurst.

No matter what obstacles he faced, Kenny brought the “Beat the Odds” mentality with him every day and challenged others to Beat the Odds as well.

Kenny was a key member of the Lakers’ back-to-back Regional Championship and World Series baseball teams. He graduated in 2020 with a bachelor’s degree in sport business management, and had intended to return to campus to study for a master’s degree in organizational leadership while helping coach the baseball team.

After his tragic death last May, the Class of 2021 decided to honor him with its Senior Class Gift, a “Beat the Odds” scholarship named for him.

The Senior Class Gift Committee set out to raise $15,000 to create the endowed scholarship, and is more than halfway toward that goal even though the pandemic has eliminated many of its customary group fundraisers. Anyone wishing to donate can visit mercyhurst.edu/alumni/senior-class-gift-give.

Among those contributing toward the scholarship was the Student Athlete Advisory Committee, which raised nearly $2,300 through a sale of apparel that featured Robinson’s “Beat the Odds” mantra.

In the words of the Senior Class Gift Committee, “Kenny was a passionate athlete, a positive soul, a selfless friend, and a true teammate on and off the field.” The Kenny Robinson Beat the Odds Scholarship will help a future Laker who embodies Kenny’s spirit and legacy in an inspirational and meaningful way.

“Kenny was the ultimate winner and the ultimate teammate,” said head baseball coach Joe Spano. “The entire baseball program, our alums, our parents and our players join me in saying thank you to the senior class. They rallied behind this scholarship in Kenny’s honor, and it means the world to us that Kenny was a part of our program and his legacy is going to live on at Mercyhurst.”
Laker student-athletes determined to keep competing

By Craig Butler

Being a student-athlete is always a balancing act. Never has that been clearer than during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Mercyhurst student-athletes have dealt with unprecedented changes to seasons and routines but, thanks to their sacrifice and hard work, the winter athletic programs had participated in more than 50 contests in the 2020-21 season as of mid-February.

After the fall season was canceled, the Mercyhurst Athletic Department developed a plan to move forward with winter and spring sports. Thanks to the support of the university, which remains committed to the student-athlete experience, the Lakers officially returned to practice in early November and put together schedules with other institutions that committed to strictly following NCAA testing guidelines.

Since competition resumed in late November, Mercyhurst has conducted more than 2,300 PCR tests across its seven winter programs.

"There is always uncertainty in college athletics and college hockey," said sophomore men's hockey defenseman Joseph Maziarz. "At Mercyhurst we have done a good job of making the protocols part of our normal. It's another part of our day-to-day like classes or practice."

"I am unbelievably proud of our student-athletes, coaches, and staff for their dedication and perseverance," said Director of Athletics Brad Davis. "The testing protocols have become part of the routine for our student-athletes and coaches, just like classes or practice. Our student-athletes have sacrificed everything in order to compete. They know they are only as good as their next test."

Men's and women's basketball, men's and women's hockey, wrestling, men's water polo, and women's bowling all competed during the winter season. Although the PSAC canceled its winter schedule and championships, Mercyhurst proceeded with men's and women's basketball and wrestling, forging an independent schedule that included multiple contests against Division I opponents.

"The players have really led the way with sacrificing to have a season. We are almost following their lead," said women's basketball head coach Brooklyn Kohlheim. "In our summer Zoom calls, they controlled all the dialogue from the start with the standards and expectations that are needed in order to stay safe and competing. It has made my job a lot easier because it is less policing."

"Although we know there are risks everywhere, our program and department are just trying to do our best to minimize those risks. Coming from a group of people that are at a point in their lives where social interactions are super important, it is amazing to watch them come together and bubble on their own, just to play. We are fortunate enough to have an administration that supports us playing, so we are just trying to do our part."

Spring sports, after losing their 2020 season, are on track to compete in 2021. They won't be the only teams competing this spring, as the fall sports are also planning for competitive opportunities.

"The landscape is changing every day but, given the success we have had getting our winter teams into competition, we are hopeful for the spring season," Davis said. "Our student-athletes have bought in and have been flexible and committed to get back to competition and we expect that to continue into the spring."
Randolph returns to coach field hockey

In a year where so many stayed at home, Mercyhurst Field Hockey brought home an alumna to take over as head coach. Brittney Randolph ’14 was named in September as the fourth head coach in Laker field hockey history.

Randolph played four seasons in Laker green and blue, appearing in 39 games. She spent the 2019 season as an assistant coach at Division III Smith College, where she helped guide a pair of All-NEWMAC players and a National Field Hockey Coaches Association Second Team All-Region selection.

Randolph previously spent two seasons as an assistant coach with perennial Division II powerhouse Shippensburg, during which the Raiders won back-to-back National Championships. She was part of the back-to-back NFHCA Coaching Staff of the Year recipients and tutored the 2018 NFHCA National Player of the Year. Three Raiders were named NFHCA All-Americans during her tenure.

She has also served in the coaching ranks for USA Field Hockey. Most recently she was appointed head coach for the 2020 USA Futures New England Regional Tournament. She also served as head coach at the 2018 & 2019 USA Futures Regional Tournament in Pennsylvania.

“I am thrilled to join the Mercyhurst University Field Hockey family in my new role as the head coach,” said Randolph. “Looking back on my experience as a student-athlete, my choice to continue my athletic and academic career at Mercyhurst was one of my best decisions. Being afforded this opportunity to start my head coaching career at Mercyhurst is just as exciting and I am so grateful for the opportunity. I look forward to being able to provide a meaningful student-athlete experience for all members of the field hockey program. Hurst truly is home, and I am beyond excited to be a part of the athletic department and campus community again!”

Former Laker QB Staley named NFL head coach

The journey to become a head coach in the National Football League is often a long and arduous one. But for former Laker Brandon Staley, the final leg of that journey was a short trip. Staley, named head coach of the Los Angeles Chargers in January, only had to move from one side of SoFi Stadium to the other. During the 2020 season, he served as defensive coordinator for the LA Rams, SoFi’s other home team.

Brandon played only one season at Mercyhurst after transferring as a graduate student from the University of Dayton. The move allowed him to play alongside his twin brother – Jason Staley ’05 – who’d been at Mercyhurst for four years.

Head coach Marty Schaetzle quickly recognized that Brandon had everything it takes to succeed in the coaching profession.

“The greatest thing he did in his year here was fit seamlessly with a group of fourth year seniors,” said Schaetzle. “They already had a rapport and he fit in immediately. He understood the big picture. That’s when I knew he could go far as a coach.”

After graduation, Brandon served as a graduate assistant at Northern Illinois before spending a season as the defensive line coach at DIII powerhouse St. Thomas. After two seasons as defensive coordinator at Hutchinson Community College, Staley spent a season each at Tennessee, John Carroll, and James Madison before returning to John Carroll for two seasons as a defensive coordinator.

He broke into the NFL with the Chicago Bears as an outside linebackers coach. After two seasons with the Bears, he took the same position with the Broncos before joining the LA Rams for the last season.

Brandon has never forgotten his Mercyhurst roots. He even spoke with the 2020 Laker squad last May to help the team understand the challenges of installing his defense with the Rams.

“He not only spoke about installing a defense virtually,” Schaetzle said, “but also about the value of team and the positive relationships he built at Mercyhurst.”

One of those Mercyhurst relationships will continue. Former Laker play caller Joe Lombardi will be the Chargers’ offensive coordinator, so the man who called plays for Brandon Staley, Mercyhurst quarterback, will now call plays for Brandon Staley, NFL head coach.

Lombardi came to Mercyhurst with Coach Schaetzle from Bucknell after a short stint in the XFL. He joins the Chargers’ staff after serving as quarterbacks coach with the New Orleans Saints.

“Brandon and Joe had a great player-coach relationship,” said Schaetzle. “Brandon brought a great maturity for Joe to coach.”

If Mercyhurst fans need another reason to watch the NFL next season, two former Lakers leading the LA Chargers is a great excuse.
Mercyhurst joins national quest to Swipe Out Hunger

The pandemic has become the epicenter of everything from elections to college life but, in terms of the latter, there is a more invisible foe – hunger.

That college students could go to class with stomachs aching and heads pounding due to hunger is a widespread problem that has long flown under the radar, exacerbated further by COVID-19. Many students who once worked part time to earn money for meals, for example, have been deprived of that opportunity.

“I’m struggling to pay my bills and eat,” said one Mercyhurst student, who asked not to be identified. The student has been getting assistance from the university’s food pantry, which provides free staples to students in need. Recently, the university chose to augment its anti-hunger efforts by joining the national Swipe Out Hunger campaign.

According to the nonprofit’s website, “one in three college students faces food insecurity nationally; the stigma around being low-income and shut out from a communal space like the dining hall has kept the conversation out of mind for many college and dining administrators.”

Not so at Mercyhurst, where four campus groups – the Organizational Leadership (OL) graduate program, the university’s Community Engagement and OneCard offices, and food services provider Parkhurst Dining – came together to enable students and employees with extra meal swipes on their dining cards to donate them to their peers.

“As a graduate assistant for the men’s and women’s water polo teams at Mercyhurst, I saw many players who had swipes left on their cards at the end of the semester that they were giving away at will,” said Alyssa Diacono, who graduated from the OL program last year and is now coach of the inaugural water polo program at Mount St. Mary’s University in Maryland. “I thought, ‘wouldn’t it be great if we could corral those swipes someplace where students who actually need them could get them?’

Diacono was one of several OL students who had researched anti-hunger initiatives at 60 U.S. colleges and universities as part of their capstone course directed by Dr. Anne Zaphiris; the end result was a rebranding of the university’s food pantry, the Mercy Market, and the launch of Swipe Out Hunger.

Ultimately, Zaphiris said, two student teams worked on various facets of the project during 2019 and 2020. Now alumni, they include Diacono, Karlie Bizzarro, Jessica David, Vincent Shioleno, Austin Shinhearl, Haleigh Giebel, and Theresa Pfister.

Both teams worked with John Patterson, director of protective services and the OneCard office, who installed the internal software and created the means for students to use the GET app to donate meals at Parkhurst facilities on campus. Colin Hurley and Bethany Woods of Community Engagement, executive director and associate director, respectively, helped launch the program and continue to oversee its operation.

“We don’t always know someone’s full situation or story, but we know through actions of mercy we can develop ways to support our students in need,” said Hurley in acknowledging the college community’s generosity. When spring semester started Jan. 25, he noted, the program had already banked 1,400 donated swipes, which students are now accessing discreetly and confidentially.

“To see this program come to life is so rewarding,” said Diacono. “Students who couldn’t afford to go eat dinner in the dining hall with their friends now can. It impacts students on so many levels – emotional, mental, and physical.”

Over the last 10 years, Swipe Out Hunger has scaled its operation and other innovative anti-hunger programs to more than 120 colleges in 39 states. Emily Kass, community engagement manager for the nonprofit, had this to say about Mercyhurst’s involvement: “We’re so excited to hear about the great success of the inaugural campaign kickoff and are looking forward to the distribution of these meals to those who need them. Our sincerest gratitude to the whole Mercyhurst community for partnering with us here at Swipe Out Hunger in an effort to end college student hunger.”

Also supportive in the program’s launch were Dr. Laura Zirkle, vice president for student life, and Dr. Greg Baker, vice president for mission.
New podcast explores Mercyhurst’s legacy

Mercyhurst has joined the world of podcasting with a series titled *Mercyhurst Made*.

The podcast is created by a partnership including the Advancement, Marketing and Brand Management, and Communication departments.

The official podcast of Mercyhurst University, *Mercyhurst Made* shares stories from students, alumni, faculty, staff, and others about how Mercyhurst has impacted their lives. Guests come from different generations, locations, and backgrounds, but all were Mercyhurst Made.

Ryan Palm ’07 developed the concept in fall 2020 while serving as associate vice president for advancement at Mercyhurst, combining his love of Mercyhurst with his love of the podcast medium.

Palm hosted the first few episodes of the series before turning over the reins to Mitchell Marsh ’20, who joined the advancement team last fall as Annual Giving Coordinator. Early guests included Joe Howard ’03, current vice president for enrollment; women’s basketball coach Brooklyn Kohlheim; faculty member Mark Simpson ’91 and senior Drew Hoover (discussing Laker Asset Management); Jeremy Dickey ’13; and Jason Staley ’05.

You can find *Mercyhurst Made* wherever you access podcasts or at mercyhurst.edu/made.

To volunteer to be a guest on the podcast, email alumni@mercyhurst.edu.

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Reunion Weekend goes virtual in 2021

Due to continuing COVID concerns, Mercyhurst will celebrate Reunion Weekend virtually in 2021.

If your class hit a special anniversary in either 2020 or 2021, please plan to join us June 10-13.

2020 Reunion Classes  
2015  1970  
2010  1965  
1995  1960  
1980

2021 Reunion Classes  
2016  1971  
2011  1966  
1996  1961  
1981

The weekend will feature Zoom class calls, virtual tours of campus, a donor recognition event, livestreamed Mass, video and photo memories of years past, and more!

In addition, we hope to welcome everyone who was meant to celebrate in 2020 or 2021 to join us in person for what should be the biggest Reunion Weekend ever. Save the date: June 9-12, 2022. Distinguished Alumni Awards and Athletics Hall of Fame inductions will also be celebrated in 2022.
By Jamie Borowicz ’82

“When a discerning Sister Carolyn Herrmann made that statement just prior to her retirement as Mercyhurst College president in 1972, she was reflecting on the turmoil that marked the transition from the late ’60s to the early ’70s and what it meant for a Mercy institution in such a rapidly changing world. When Vice President for Mission Greg Baker chose that sentiment as inspiration for a painting the university commissioned local artist Jamie Borowicz to create last spring, prior to the pandemic, little did he know how authentically Sister’s words would resonate today.

Order your professional print today: mhur.st/artwork
HOME COMING

COVID-19 derailed the traditional Homecoming last fall, but more than 600 guests celebrated Mercyhurst anyway at a virtual “Homecoming from Home.”

Fifty class years were represented (from 1959 on), and alumni logged on from 31 states and nine countries. They connected with classmates, teammates, faculty members and coaches at virtual gatherings, and enjoyed a livestreamed Mass, a fierce Mercyhurst trivia competition, a virtual 5K walk/run, the first training session for alumni who want to become Mercy Emissaries, virtual tours, and more.
The ‘70s

Gary Bukowski, CFRE ’73 was recently featured in Giving Tomorrow, showcasing his passion for improving the lives of others in his fundraising career.

William Chiodo ’73 was the first recipient of the 2020 Legacy Award from the Florida Art Education Association. The award recognizes a lifelong leader and arts advocate who has significantly shaped visual arts education. Prior to his retirement, he had a 40-year career with Miami-Dade County Public Schools, America’s fourth-largest school system.

Val Sherrange Crofoot ’76 married Pete Zielinski at St. Hedwig Church in Erie, Pennsylvania, on March 20, 2020. They met at Mercyhurst in the first class of the Geriatric Care Assistant Program.

An editorial in The Arts in Psychotherapy marked the 40th anniversary of the journal’s longtime cover art image, which was created by Will Ursprung ’76 in 1980. The cover incorporated various forms of artistic expression and was inspired by Rorschach ink blots. Now legally blind, Ursprung has retired from actively practicing art therapy but continues to focus on his art, participating in artist residencies and showcasing his work.

The ‘80s

Matthew Whelan ’86 was named the ninth president and first lay male president of Caldwell University in New Jersey. He most recently served as Vice President for University Enrollment Strategy and Relationship Development at Stony Brook University.

Daniel P. Spizarny ’87 received an award from the U.S. Department of Defense that recognizes supervisors who go above and beyond to support service members of the National Guard and Reserves.

The ‘90s


Anthony “Tony” Prusak ’90 has been named director of business development for FHTVirtual powered by Cadence, the first virtual meeting platform for global medical associations to support their virtual conferences.

Ken “Breeze” Walker ’90 has retired after 25 years of service with the Pennsylvania State Police.

Kathy Ets-Hokin ’91 received the Junior Outstanding Parent Service Award from USA Volleyball and was honored at the 2020 Hall of Fame virtual induction ceremony.

Shane Krige ’91 has been named general manager of The Abaco Club on Winding Bay in The Bahamas.

Craig Rybczynski ’95 received the Tom Borrelli Award as the National Lacrosse League’s Media Member of the Year.

The ‘00s

Scott Koskoski ’00, a national philanthropy consultant and leadership coach, recently launched Carpe Diem Fundraising, a boutique consulting firm specializing in helping small- and medium-sized organizations dramatically scale their social impact and raise more money. Scott is also a member of senior leadership at Trinity School for Ministry and resides with his wife and four children in Washington, Pennsylvania.

Victor Laurenza ’02 has been named senior vice president and team leader for Key Private Bank’s Western Pennsylvania Market. Laurenza leads the market’s wealth management team and helps clients achieve their wealth building and preservation goals.

JP Ratajczak ’02 ’04M was inducted to the Council of Competitive Intelligence Fellows at its annual meeting in October 2020. CI Fellows have been recognized by their peers for leadership in the discipline of competitive intelligence. In August, he was also awarded the Profound Impact Leader Award by the Competitive Intelligence Community of the Special Libraries Association (SLA). He leads the competitive intelligence team for Nationwide’s retirement plan business in Columbus, Ohio.

Eric Schultz ’02 was promoted to sergeant at the Monroe County Sheriff Office in Rochester, New York, where he has worked for the past 13 years. He is married to Julie Lindsay Schultz ’02.

Erin Cunningham Peters ’04 started a new role with Nordson Corporation as global leader of talent processes.

Ricardo A. Aguirre, Jr. ’05, a documentarian and online media producer, interviewed fellow Mercyhurst alumn Rob Keefe ’03 as part of his COVID-19 interview series. Rob is head coach and president of football operations for the Arena Football League’s Albany Empire. Ricardo and Rob discussed their experiences with COVID-19, the effects of the pandemic on sports and athletes, specifically the AFL, and athletes speaking out. The music in the interview was done by Mercyhurst alumn Anthony Fahey ’05.

Emilee Ballaro ’05 (Williamsville, New York) married Matthew Despagni (Manhasset, New York) on Oct. 5, 2019, in New York City at their local parish, St. Francis de Sales Roman Catholic Church on the Upper East Side. They met in the spring of 2014 while playing softball in Central Park as members of the “Saints & Sinners” recreational softball league sponsored by the Catholic Diocese of New York.

Jessica Lamb Giordano ’05 was named to the 2020 Forty under 40 Class by Sports Business Journal. The Forty Under 40 awards annually celebrate the best young talent in sports business. Jessie is senior vice president, client consulting and services, and head of San Francisco GMR Marketing.

Ted Nagorsen ’05 and Marley McKenzie Nagorsen ’09 had their third daughter, Piper Quinn, on Feb. 2, 2020.

Edward Bolden III ’07 and wife Heather had a son, Alexander Leo, on Aug. 25, 2020. He joins siblings Kali and Eddie.

Lindsay Peters Heilman ’07 and husband Elias had their fourth child, daughter Willow Mae, on Oct. 2, 2019. Willow joins siblings Bingham, Remington, and Easton.
Abby Brennan Power ‘07 founded The Solutionary School in January 2020 to engage with communities of all ages to create social change. Its flagship program is “The Kids of Solutionary Street” Puppet Workshop. Abby believes play can be an inlet to creating a more compassionate and just world. These virtual and in-person workshops reach children around the world.

Crystal Mihollen Ratkovsky ’07 and Ryan Ratkovsky ’07 had a son, Paxton Lee, on Oct. 28, 2020.

Adam Stewart ’07 has been named assistant vice president of sales and sales strategy for PSECU, Pennsylvania’s largest credit union.

Lisa Bannister ’08 was named Employee of the Month for June 2020 at Lake Erie Correctional Institution in Conneaut, Ohio. A career tech instructor, she was reassigned during the pandemic to Front Entry to help process staff in and out each day.

Classmates Mary Bennaton ’08 and César Torres ’08 are helping to oversee the “Honduras Hurricane ETA - Rebuild Homes Fundraiser.” The fundraiser is dedicated to helping communities recover from the devastating effects of two consecutive hurricanes that struck Honduras in November 2020.

Kerry Bowman ’08 and Jessica Lamb Bowman ’07 had their first child, Robert Knox, on Oct. 23, 2019, in Arlington, Virginia.

Kaitlyn Slomski Nelson ’08 and Elijah Nelson ’20 had a son, Theodore “Teddy” John, on Dec. 10, 2019. His dad, an adult student, finished his last final only hours before Teddy arrived.

Courtney Olevnik ’08 ’13M, who formerly served as director of annual giving, began a new role as director of international student services at Mercyhurst. She will lead the development and implementation of strategic plans for successful recruitment, enrollment, and student services for the International Student Office.

Kristin Peterson Pierce ’08 released her fourth children’s book, The Sweet Dreams Express: A Meditative Bedtime Journey, on Aug. 5, 2020. It became an Amazon bestseller. On Sept. 20, 2020, she also released a memoir about her journey with ovarian cancer titled My Cosmic Hammer: When Life Shakes You Up to Wake You Up. Kristin was an athlete on the Mercyhurst volleyball team when she was diagnosed with ovarian cancer between her junior and senior years at Mercyhurst at the age of 21. Kristin is the founder of Inner Compass Books and lives in Warman, Saskatchewan, Canada, with her husband, Matt Pierce ’09, and children Aspen and Kendrix.

The ’10s

Danielle Feller Kaiser ’10 and Nick Kaiser ’09 had a son, Caden Anthony, on Jan. 15, 2021. Danielle is the administrative assistant in the dance department at Mercyhurst and head coach for the dance team. Nick is a quality control manager for Sachs Electric, currently working on the new launchpad facility for SpaceX on Cape Canaveral.

Cara Adamo Natalo ’10 accepted a position as branch manager in the Cochranstown branch of The One Federal Credit Union.

Bruno Didiano ’10 and Elizabeth McMullen Didiano ’10 had their first child, Dominic William, on Oct. 29, 2019. Bruno is an attorney working at Gateway Health. Elizabeth is advancement manager at the Senator John Heinz History Center in Pittsburgh, Pa.

Colleen Gaffney Volkmar ’10 and husband Jeff had their first child, Avery Rose, on Dec. 22, 2019.

Emily Warren Zimmer ’10 and husband Gregory had their first child, Leo Edward, on April 6, 2020.

Meaghan Farrell Christian ’11 ’14M and husband Matt had a son, Hudson Leo, on March 12, 2020. He joins older brother Lincoln.

Alicia Grosso ’11 earned her Ph.D. from the University of Pittsburgh.

Marleah Williams ’12 married Evan Wolfe on Oct. 3, 2020, at Mother of Sorrows Church in Ashtabula, Ohio. Marleah is a Lead Counselor at Glenbeigh Hospital in Rock Creek, Ohio.

Gretta Freyermuth ’13 and Eric Lundgren ’13 were married Aug. 30, 2019, at Heinz Chapel in Pittsburgh. Gretta played volleyball and Eric was a wrestler at Mercyhurst. The bridal party included fellow alumni Elyse Texido ’13, Katie Powell ’13, Becky Nagy Leush ’13, Kelly Perry Clarke ’13, Patrick Carter ’12, Levi Smeltzer ’12, Jordan Shields ’13, Michael Baxter ’13, Colin Farabaugh ’12, and Marc Weinheimer ’12. Eric and Gretta are living in Eugene, Oregon.

Alyssa Ross ’13 married Stephen Miller on Oct. 11, 2019, in Cleveland, Ohio. Both work for large law firms in downtown Cleveland.

Alumni Deaths

Dorothy Kuhn Heidecker ’44
Helen Walsh Redmond ’50
Sally Carlow Kohler ’51
Dorothy Szanczik Reese ’52
Camilla Decampli Fellner ’53
Patricia J. Liebel ’53
Helen Fogarty O’Connell ’53
Rosemary McCabe Kaveney ’54
Carole Roberson Dyne ’56
Carol Kelly Hession ’56
Georgia Lackey Kolcum-Patriar ’56
M. Christine Haughton Loftus ’56
Patricia Kuharsky Kreger ’57
Barbara Story Walk ’57
Alice O’Brien Bell ’58
Susan McCartney Horowitz ’59
Lois Vosmus ’59
Mary Lou Kelly ’60
Gayle Cummings Martin ’60
Catherine Srbic Sok ’60
Hermine Stefanski Cech ’61
Ann Fondy Pysh ’62
Barbara Becker ’64
Susan Smith-Beidler ’65
Ruth Page ’66
Agnes Seneway ’66
Sister Paul Marie Westlake, RSM ’67
Sister Elisabeth Lintsen ’70
Sister Kathryn Disbrow, OSB ’70
Linda Griffith Kester ’71
Ellen Ketter ’71
Kathleen Devine Pagni ’73

Maureen Sullivan Maus ’73
Lt. James Schwartz Sr. ’74
James Rinderle ’75
Tommy Thompson ’75
Charles “Matt” Bole ’76
Joseph Dolan ’76
Debi D’Alessandris Parisi ’76
Karen Wilmer Waldo ’76
Olivia Longo Martin ’77
Patrick Mikula ’77
James Hurlbut ’78
David Maries ’79
Jeffery Roberts ’79
Linda First Frisina ’81
Rebecca Fairchild Costello ’82
Malinda Coleman Gavins ’82
Larry Jones ’82
Tim McFarland ’82
Kenneth Thomas ’84
Barbara Mazzone ’85
Christine Mack Arne ’86
David Catalano ’90
Peter Ogden ’92
Karen Stahl Kieffer ’93
JoAnn Ploss White ’99
Mea Connor ’01
Analida Vial Braeger ’02
Kurt Cummings ’03
Katherine Onufer ’03
Emily Bostwick ’04
Yvonne Peck ’08

Husband of:
Sylvia Haise Colson ’58 (Warren Colson)
Elizabeth Wahl Hilbert ’58 (Donald Hilbert)
Jeanne Bricher Bender ’67 (Harold Bender)
Peggy Anibaldi Patrick ’68 (Guy Patrick, Mercyhurst campus minister during the 1970s)
Christine Sabatelli Sonnone ’75 (Tommy Thompson ’75)
Laura Smilo Bole ’78 (Charles “Matt” Bole ’76). Matt was also the brother of Denise Bole Krol ’75 and brother-in-law of Barbara Smilo Glover ’81.

Mother of:
Julie Colditz Morrow ’78 (Patricia Colditz Hare)

Father of:
Anita Harvey Meyer ’91 (Allen Harvey)
Suzanne Daley Esposito ’84 (John Daley)
Laura Junker Hillwig ’03 (James Junker)

Brother of:
Judith Emling ’66 (Jerry Emling)

Stepson of:
Elizabeth Wahl Hilbert ’58 (Michael Hilbert)

Family and friends of:
Joseph Baumann, friend of the University
Julia Gorniak, friend of the University
Rev. Dr. Robert W. Harris, former Religious Studies faculty
Bob Potalivo, former faculty member
Join us on March 30, 2021 as we seize the day on our annual Giving Day! Help us unlock a $50,000 match from an anonymous donor!

Learn more at givingday.mercyhurst.edu or use the enclosed pledge card to mail in your gift today.