



LIFE TOOK AN UNEXPECTED TURN WHEN DAN MCGRATH WAS “DRAFTED” INTO THE JOB OF HIGH SCHOOL PRESIDENT.



BY DAN MCGRATH, JOUR '72

I DIDN'T SEE A CORRELATION BETWEEN MY DEPARTURE FROM THE *CHICAGO TRIBUNE* AND BOB FOSTER'S RETIREMENT AS PRESIDENT OF LEO HIGH SCHOOL ON CHICAGO'S SOUTH SIDE WHEN BOTH OCCURRED EIGHT YEARS AGO. BUT THE LORD, WE KNOW, WORKS IN MYSTERIOUS WAYS.

ROOKIE SEASON

IN OVER MY HEAD — ONCE AGAIN.



I’M FIGURING IT OUT BY ADHERING TO ONE GUIDING PRINCIPLE: I CARE. THE KIDS KNOW I DO.

I saw Dwight Clark make “the catch” that beat the Dallas Cowboys in the 1981 NFC Championship game and sent the San Francisco 49ers to their first Super Bowl. I was there when Kirk Gibson took Dennis Eckersley deep to give the Los Angeles Dodgers an improbable victory over the Oakland A’s in Game 1 of the 1988 World Series. There were 4,000 of us packed into Toso Pavilion in December 1981 when skinny North Carolina freshman Mike Jordan announced himself to the college basketball world, dominating the Cable Car Classic in Santa Clara, Calif. Seventeen years later “Michael” Jordan was no less amazing when he hit the shot over Utah’s Bryon Russell that gave the Chicago Bulls a sixth NBA championship.

The kids at Leo High School enjoy hearing me tell these stories. Or maybe they’re humoring me.

Sports journalism was very good to me during 30-plus years in the profession — better than I could have imagined when I graduated from the College of Journalism. Two years covering Marquette Warriors basketball for *The Marquette Tribune* fueled an ambition to write sports for a living. I wouldn’t trade a day of it.

The final act brought me home to Chicago for a 13-year run as sports editor at the *Chicago Tribune*. Along with three Bulls championships, a White Sox World Series win and a Bears Super Bowl, we covered Marquette’s 2003 run to the Final Four so zealously that a colleague suggested we were following the Golden Eagles as we might a local team. “Your point?” I replied.

I left the *Trib* a year after it was sold in 2008, around the

time Bob Foster was stepping down after 40 years as Leo High School’s president. “Distinguished service” doesn’t begin to describe his impact; he’d made it his life’s mission to keep my *alma mater* alive and thriving.

I’d been volunteering at Leo and was on the committee to find Foster’s successor. I thought my fellow committee members were joking when they recommended me for the job — Leo is in the education business, and I’m neither an educator nor a businessman. But I woke one morning with a feeling of clarity: I think I need to do this.

I was 32 years old when I became sports editor of the *San Francisco Chronicle*. In hindsight, I didn’t know what I was doing. But I figured it out by figuring how to put people in positions to succeed, giving them assignments likely to generate their best work.

I was nearly 60 when I took over at Leo, in over my head once again. I’m figuring it out by adhering to one guiding principle: I care. The kids know I do, and if they know you care, you’ll get their best effort. It’s good enough that we have graduated 100 percent of our seniors for eight years running, with more than 90 percent of them going on to college.

The duties vary — one morning I’m raising money to keep the doors open and, in the afternoon, I’m walking the halls offering granola bars as an alternative to the chips and junk food that are staples of too many diets. I have an encouraging word for a kid who’s struggling; an “attaboy” for one who aces a test. I’m a sideline presence at almost every sporting event.

We draw students from some truly disadvantaged areas, and the byproducts of poverty often accompany them to school. Eric's mother had drug issues. His father was incarcerated. Eric lived with an aunt and was borderline hostile, suspicious of our motives when we tried to be nice to him: Why? No one else was.

But we stayed with it and gradually helped Eric build self-esteem. He had a nice career as a football running back, graduated from Leo (with his mom present) and is currently in junior college, intent on playing at a four-year school.

Shantrell was not a bad kid, just so desperate for attention that he worked at being a class clown. We considered letting him go after he acted up on a field trip to the Big Ten Network that had the other kids captivated. But a come-to-Jesus meeting about responsible behavior turned him around. By junior year Shantrell was a class officer. By graduation, he and his mom had dug up so much financial assistance that he's attending one of Illinois' top state schools virtually for free. He's majoring in theatre arts. If he turns up telling jokes on late-night TV, we'll be able to say we knew him when.

Sadly, we're not change agents for all the kids who come to us. For some the lure of the streets is too strong. Jerome was Leo's quarterback my first year, a talented, charismatic kid who should have played in college. Instead, he went to state prison, implicated in a home invasion that turned into an armed robbery because someone carried a gun.

And we're not immune to the street violence that plagues Chicago. Miles, a football lineman who was more teddy bear than terror, still uses a wheelchair five years after being shot while trying to extricate his cousin from an encounter with gang-bangers near his home. Miles' mother collapsed when a doctor told her the bone and bullet fragments lodged at the base of his spine might prevent Miles from walking again. Her anguish turned to joy six months later when he wheeled himself up to the stage to receive his diploma with Leo's Class of 2013.

Antonio never made it to senior year. On the night he completed our summer bridge program, he was shot near his cousin's house by neighborhood thugs who mistook him for a rival drug dealer. Realizing their mistake, they shot him four more times so he'd never identify them.

Antonio was 14 and looked 12, with a light-up-the-room smile that endeared him to everybody here. How anyone could perceive him as a drug dealer ... it haunts me to this day.

I was roughly Antonio's age when I took the placement exam for Leo as a nervous eighth-grader. One month later my father died, leaving a widow with seven kids. I remember my mother's gratitude and relief weeks later when the Leo Alumni Association extended an offer to sponsor me.

What do you know when you're 14, but I told myself that if I'm ever in position to pay this back, I will. And here I am. Eight years in it's still a challenge, but I wouldn't trade a day of it.

The Leo High School I attended was a robust, Catholic League powerhouse of 1,100 boys, mostly first-generation Irish kids from surrounding neighborhoods. But the 1960s were uneasy times on Chicago's South Side. A shooting in a church parking lot a half-mile west of Leo touched off a round of white flight that occurred with supersonic speed. As the area around Leo acquired an unsavory reputation, white alums stopped sending their sons, and over time the school population came to reflect the neighborhood's; since the early 1990s, Leo has been nearly 100 percent African American.

But a mission doesn't change because neighborhood demographics change. As residents, businesses and even churches were abandoning the Auburn-Gresham community, Leo has stayed put and stayed true to its mission to prepare young men for life. Those young men are the best ambassadors we have. After 91 years, Leo remains an oasis for learning, safe and nurturing, a beacon of hope in a troubled area.

The Lord knew what He was doing when He put me here. It's an honor to serve. ☺

For eight consecutive years Leo High School has boasted a 100-percent graduation rate for its seniors.



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