

## **“NEVER FORGET WHERE YOU CAME FROM” HONORING JOHN NASSEFF’S LEGACY**

“Are you coming to the farm on Tuesday?” Such was a question I heard countless times over the past ten years or so. The farm in question is near Somerset, WI and it has been my privilege to visit many times with Saint Paul native **John Nasseff** and his gracious wife **Helene** at that idyllic spot. In fact, the farm in question was Helene’s childhood home. I so enjoy these visits because I am able to put on a pair of blue jeans, work boots and gloves and do something completely different on a “day off” from parish life. It is important for all of us to break our routine occasionally, lest we feel trapped in the classic comedy, Groundhog Day. I’d occasionally stop by a cigar store in Hudson on the way (I am a non-smoker, but they never figured that out!), and bring a gift cigar to a man who so completely transformed the campus at Saint Agnes School through his tremendous generosity.

I vividly recall sitting across the table from John and Helene at the Downtowner Restaurant on West 7th Street on April 26, 2007. My stomach was **churning with nervousness**, as I prepared to tell Saint Agnes School’s story. We were faced with daunting challenges to keep our school viable. In the sales world this is known as a “cold call.” Would I even recognize this couple whom I had never previously met? Before the waiter even brought out the menus, John shared with me: “Before we begin Father, I need you to know two things” – words that I have grown to respect with each passing day– “Do you know how many people ask me for help?” “No, I do not, but I can only imagine,” was my sheepish reply. He then added, “If you’re going to tell me that unless I help, your school is going to close, I have some news for you- that’s your problem, not mine.” Ouch! He did not say it in a nasty tone, but he was certainly firm. Then out came the menus! Sadly, Pepto Bismol was not one of the options.

I proceeded to share my plan to move forward with a lean staff, (including painful cuts resulting in a savings of \$776,000) and a K-12 projected enrollment of **339 students** for the 2007-08 school year. In the meantime, I needed significant funding to make payroll during the next months. I have retained that one-page summary in a safe place! John always referred to it as my “ledger,” and he apparently appreciated my brevity. He heard me out, saying little as I made my pitch to a man who effectively had no connection with the school. He was neither an alumnus, nor a current contributor. But desperate times call for desperate measures.

And yet, I tried to remain optimistic because at the very core of my being I truly believed in the school’s mission. It was a faithfully Catholic school then, as now. I would only later learn that John would pray the rosary daily on his walks through the city and stop in the downtown parishes to light a candle for his parents, his relatives or friends. To make a long story short, he offered a substantial challenge gift at the end of the dinner and suddenly there was a at least a chance the school would keep its doors open. Stay open it did– Saint Agnes has **719 students enrolled this year** and has seen an increase in enrollment each year since 2007!

Little could I have known that this would grow into a more than decade long friendship. Many subsequent Tuesdays (my day off) I would spend at Helene’s childhood farm near Somerset, WI. John worked hard even in retirement, clearing brush, chopping wood for the stove, and filling the bird feeders. It was a refuge, a peaceful place of refuge, and I grew to love it. We would play cribbage, enjoy lunch and then he would smoke his signature cigar. John was a mentor who taught me many valuable lessons in life – the value of hard work and not wasting anything; the gift of a rock-solid faith and strong devotion to our Blessed Mother, Our Lady of Lebanon; the importance of always remembering where you came from. He never, ever appeared to be “privileged,” but rather was the same man when wealthy, as he was in his very humble beginnings. As in a Horatio Alger novel, he left school after 9th grade to help support his siblings.

He enlisted to serve his country during World War II and upon his return, landed a job on the loading dock at West Publishing. His suggestions for efficiency caught the eye of his supervisors– when noticing significant waste from the cut paper rolls, John inquired why they did not make the rolls to match the size of the books. His ideas saved the company millions and he eventually became the company’s Vice President of Engineering and Facilities, the only non-lawyer and non-degreed member of the company’s Board. He oversaw the

company's move to its Eagan headquarters. Though materially blessed through his own ingenuity, he never lost his "blue collar" work ethic. He wasted nothing, while supporting major projects at several hospitals, and quietly helping countless individuals in need. His wake service was held at Saint Agnes School, and many hundreds waited in line to pay their respects. I was honored to lead the rosary at the wake, so fitting given his love of the Blessed Mother. Fittingly, I wrote this column on Tuesday at the same time I would typically be visiting John and Helene. Well done, good and faithful servant.

- Our nation lost a great spiritual leader in the **Rev. Billy Graham**. He touched millions of lives through his preaching. Over 58 years, Billy Graham reached millions in over 185 countries and territories on six continents in over 400 Crusades. When interviewed in 2010, he said that if he had to do anything differently, he'd travel less, and spend more time in quiet prayer in God's presence. Not wanting to steal sheep, he encouraged people to go back to the churches of their youth. *Requiescat in pace.*
- Tired of the snow? Then don't travel to Rome! This past Sunday, the **first measurable snow since 2012** shut down the Eternal City, including the Colosseum and the Roman Forum. But that did not prevent the American and British seminarians from waging a friendly snowball fight in St. Peter's Square! Before 2012, one must go back to 1986 for any significant snow in Rome.
- Once again, at the request of the Holy Father, dioceses are asked to host "24 Hours for the Lord," a confession marathon to highlight the importance of God's mercy this Lent. Beginning this Friday morning March 9 at 8:00 a.m., and continuing until 8:00 a.m. on Saturday March 10, the confessional light will be on and the Blessed Sacrament exposed for Adoration. God's mercy is stronger than any sin we could commit. I am grateful for the visiting priests who will help us fill all the slots.
- I never would have guessed it, but the live coverage of Olympic Curling captivated me early each morning during my workout time. The players were mic'd-up and U.S. discussed strategy right in front of the other team, adding to my fascination. Congratulations to the Men's team for their Gold medal performance.

Sincerely in Christ,

Fr. John L. Ubel,  
Rector