

Leadership and Mission at Jesuit Schools Today

When my father taught at St. Ignatius, a Jesuit high school in Chicago, from 1948 to 1950, he was one of the first laypeople on the faculty. By the time I was a student there, a generation later, the high school had changed: Jesuits constituted a distinct minority of its teachers. The trend has continued over the ensuing decades, of course, and a similar scenario has unfolded at other Catholic, Jesuit institutions across the country.

Yet on a number of occasions, an especially great and authoritative St. Ignatius alumnus—Rev. Robert A. Wild, S.J., president of Marquette University for the bulk of the period from 1996 to 2014—has been heard to say that this did not cause him to worry for the mission of these schools. Rather the opposite, he would maintain: Whereas in the bygone days it was natural instinct for laypeople at Marquette University to ascribe “responsibility for the mission” to the many “men in black,” the diminished number of Jesuits on the university’s campus has meant that others, too, have had to embrace the mission for it to thrive. And many others have indeed done so.

At the same time, no one would doubt the importance of presidential leadership. For almost a decade, Father Wild’s successor, Michael R. Lovell, has been the first layperson to serve as president of Marquette University, and the Law School, along with the rest of the university, has benefited from this lay president’s leadership not just generally but, for the topic at hand, with respect to the university’s mission. My purpose here is not to catalog all the ways in which this is true but to give a particular example.

The photo accompanying this column is of President Lovell with



In January 2023, Marquette University President Michael R. Lovell recognized Katie Mertz, director of pro bono and public service at Marquette Law School, with a “Difference Maker” award. Mertz directs the Marquette Volunteer Legal Clinics, where volunteer attorneys and students serve more than 5,000 people a year at sites around Milwaukee.

Katie Mertz, director of pro bono and public service at the Law School. This past January, President Lovell honored Director Mertz with a Marquette University “Difference Maker” award. The recognition was focused on her work in leading the Marquette Volunteer Legal Clinics (MVLCS), a quite extraordinary set of community-based operations in Milwaukee in which practicing lawyers and Marquette law students provide brief legal advice to community members trying to find their way through the world generally and legal problems more specifically. The MVLCS make a real difference in this region, and their reliance on *partnerships*—with local agencies and lawyers—is definitely a page out of President Lovell’s book.

Katie Mertz knows something about Jesuit schools, as a Marquette lawyer herself and as the granddaughter and daughter of

Marquette University graduates in the 1940s and 1970s. It is interesting to note as well that the Marquette Volunteer Legal Clinics got their start, more than 20 years ago, not through employees but rather from the work of Marquette lawyers and students (e.g., Julie J. Darnieder, L’78, and Tanner B. Kilander, then a student and subsequently L’02) and others in the legal profession.

There is, as we often say, an exquisite congruence between the Law School’s undertakings in the legal profession and the mission of Marquette University. No one exemplifies the first of those better than Director Katie Mertz, and no one embodies the second more than President Michael Lovell. The latter’s recognition of the former with a “Difference Maker” award honors and reflects that congruence.

Joseph D. Kearney
Dean and Professor of Law