



SAINT THOMAS
ACADEMY

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FEATURE

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BY DAVID JACOBSON



It took **Brian Ragatz '98** just 25 years to land his dream job as the first-ever president of Saint Thomas Academy. “Our newspaper predicted 25 years ago that I would be doing this,” Ragatz said. “And, on a Facebook post about my hiring someone commented, ‘Brian told me when he was 17 that he wanted this job.’”



President Brian Ragatz greets Philly Solomon '24 on the first day of the school year.

Ragatz is the Academy's 30th leader – succeeding Kelby Woodard – and the first to carry the title of President. The change in title breathes fresh breath into a position that has evolved over the years. Current Chairman of the Board of Trustees, **Tom Lee '85**, explained, “The title of Headmaster is antiquated. The new title reflects what we are: a professionally run Catholic institution with the mission of turning boys into men of character.”

Lee noted that there were many great candidates for the role of President, but “Brian was the best of the bunch. His passion for the job was exceptional, drawn from how the school impacted his life.”

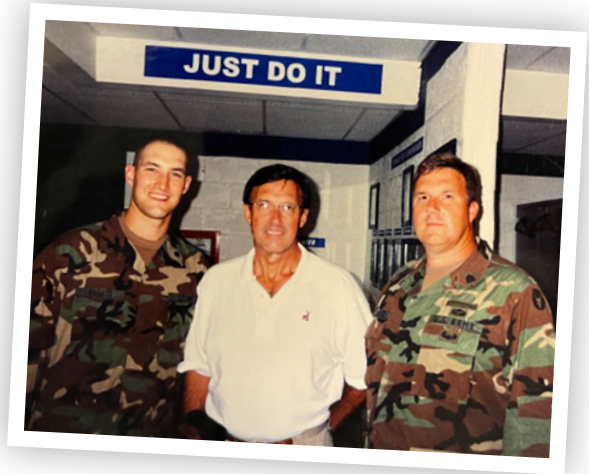
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Top: Brian with his family, wife Anne, son George, and family dog. Bottom: Brian in his office, with a sign that embodies his work ethic.





Ragatz pictured at Ft. Jackson, South Carolina for Basic Training in 2003.



Ragatz received the “Battalion Soldier of the Cycle” award. Pictured with him are his father, Steve (middle) and his uncle, Command Sgt. Major Paul Ragatz with the Minnesota Army National Guard (right) as they attended the award presentation event.



Ragatz in his social studies teacher days.



Ragatz pinning ceremony with his parents when he became a commissioned officer and a Second Lieutenant.



Ragatz arrives from his previous position as president of the Catholic Schools Center of Excellence, which bolsters academic performance and admissions in Minnesota’s preK-8th grade Catholic schools. His prior positions also include service as the principal of St. Odilia, St. Thomas More and Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary Catholic schools.

Ragatz served as second lieutenant in the Army National Guard for four years after graduating from college, earning a bachelor’s degree in social science with a minor in secondary education from St. John’s University and a master’s degree in educational administration from St. Mary’s University of Minnesota. He earned his educational specialist/Minnesota K-12 principal’s license in 2021 from the University of St. Thomas. He has taught social studies and religion at Nativity of Our Lord Catholic School, as well as teaching education courses as an adjunct professor at both St. Mary’s and the University of St. Thomas.



Brian played tight end and defensive end for the Cadets.

Of course, Ragatz’s time as a Cadet provided the basis of his thought process and approach to leadership. “Saint Thomas Academy was always the right fit for me,” he said. “I say unapologetically that those were the best four years of my life. It was critical. It taught me who I am. It gave me a solid foundation and a moral compass so I would know what I should do.”

One highlight was his sports career, including basketball, baseball, track and field, and football, where he played tight end and defensive end and was a tri-captain his senior year, along with **Jim Miley ’98** and **Pat Gilbert ’98**. Football also played a role in one of the most important occurrences in Ragatz’s young life.

“My grandpa passed away during my junior year, and that crushed me,” Ragatz recalled. “He meant the world to me and had great impact on me. The last time I saw him was at the Academy when I was named a team captain, and he passed away the next month. My football coach, **Bob Slater ’77**, let me put my jersey, number 16, into his casket.

“At my grandpa’s funeral, I sat in the front row, and I saw **Willie Abbott ’98**, my friend from grade school and high school, take communion and then walk over to me and tap my shoulder. Then all 100 Cadets who attended each came up to me and tapped my shoulder, and I just lost it.”

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“We want to be a school that has figured out how to teach boys academics and teach them character and kindness.”

Brian with his family, wife Anne, son George.



Ragatz also was instrumental in the Peer Mentor Group and Choose to Be Chemical Free, now known as The Choose Program. Another key activity, again inspired by his grandpa, was performing in VISTA's production of *The Music Man*.

"He'd always wanted me to be in a show," Ragatz said. "I kept explaining to him that as an athlete, that was not my crowd. My grandpa told me to have the guts to do what I wanted, and the year after he passed, I decided to join the cast."

That experience in crossing social lines informs Ragatz's views of student life today. During lunch with seniors soon after his hiring as president, Ragatz asked their advice and heard Cadets' concerns about cliquiness. "That can be blamed on the pandemic, when we were limited to contact with a core group of friends. But we want everyone walking down a hallway to say, 'Hi, what's up?' to each other. Simply acknowledge each other."

That view, along with supporting a no-cell-phones-in-the-hallways policy, "can create a culture of caring," Ragatz said. "That starts from the top down, but it also has to come from the bottom up." Walking that talk, Ragatz endeavored to greet by name every staff member in their first group meeting during Workshop Week. He studied the yearbook to memorize faces and names.

The caring culture as a complement to the Four Pillars should contribute to advancing the Academy's overall excellence. "We want to put men out into the world to make good and just decisions," Ragatz said. "We want to be a school that has figured out how to teach boys academics *and* teach them character and kindness. We want other schools to call us and ask how we do it."

Ragatz anticipates fielding those calls for a long time to come. "This has *always* been my dream job," he said. "God willing, this will be my last post before I retire."



Above: George in front of the many jerseys, as the Ragatz family enjoys all sports.

Below: A friendly game of pop-a-shot at home.



Ragatz shared this Leadership Statement:

I believe that everybody who walks into my building asks me three questions:

1) Do you see me? 2) Do you like what you see? 3) How will your decisions uphold our mission?

My job is to answer those questions for every person every day through my words and actions. I do this by getting to know them, knowing when to lead and when to cheerlead, bridging gaps, and bringing various constituencies closer to the aligned mission.

There is a difference between leading to be “right” and leading to be “successful.” I think a sign of a good leader is somebody who understands how people need to be led and then adapts to make others successful. I can understand what needs to be done and the intentionality and dedication to get there.

This also supports my philosophy of education, which is to educate the whole person, establish authentic and empathetic relationships, and lead to success by meeting the needs of people. To do this with integrity, schools must develop an educational experience that is transformational versus merely transactional.

A transformational education pushes students and staff to their best versions of themselves while gaining a deeper relationship with God, self, and others. In contrast, a transactional education is meant only to attain credentials for college admission.

In an all-male environment, I would take a stance on how critical it is for the cadets to turn into 21st-century men. Although this includes the importance of speaking confidently, looking people in the eye, and having a firm handshake, it also means the ability to obtain, sustain, and maintain relationships with a wide variety of people, including God, and make good, kind, and just decisions.

This takes nothing short of a village, and that is why I am very intentional about not only working with leadership teams and the staff they are accountable for, but also having the staff working in collaboration with each other, as well as parents, to ensure that students obtain a solid foundation in all of these areas. I believe that when we all work together, students win every time. This is why I thrive on working closely with stakeholders while being accessible and highly visible to all.

It is my belief that relationships are at the center of any successful school. At Saint Thomas Academy, that means a relationship with God and one another is at the core of what we do. Just as the Bible shows us how Jesus centered the relationships with his apostles in John 14:31, so must we prioritize our relationships with our faith and with each other.

For holistic education to be successful, we must not only work to improve ourselves, but also each other. At Saint Thomas Academy, learning how to learn, how to listen, how to prepare, how to persevere, how to achieve, how to act, and how to respond matters just as much as pursuing excellence, faith, and service to each other and our communities.

Suppose we can do this every day for every Cadet. In that case, we will build upon a foundation of excellence while transforming them to morally lead tomorrow’s world, which is exactly what I plan on doing and achieving as President of Saint Thomas Academy.