


November 4, 2025

Friends of Cristo Rey,

It has been just one year since John McConnell, Jr., our founding Cristo Rey Philadelphia High School President, passed away. This morning, we hosted a mass in his honor in our Sanctuary for family and close friends.

Following in his footsteps, I often find myself using a saying that was common in the early days at 5218 North Broad Street. Fulfilling the Cristo Rey Philadelphia mission is "*hard work, good work, our work.*" With that, I couldn't think of someone better to reflect on John's legacy and the hard and good work of the last 13 years than Rich Pugh, our Director of Student Life and founding Campus Minister. Please see below for his words regarding John's impact on our community.

In Blue Pride,



Tom Shoemaker  
President & CEO  
Cristo Rey Philadelphia High School



The origin story of Cristo Rey Philadelphia is full of lore about kitchen table conversations and napkin sketches that would become the groundwork for a high school serving over 500 students. Prior to 2012, the "newest" Catholic school in the city opened in 1966. Prior to 2012, the Cristo Rey Network had only 24 schools. John was well acquainted with both of these facts. He was diligent in his research of what it would take to be the 25th school in the Network and the first Catholic school to open in Philadelphia in over 40 years. He saw that Catholic schools were not filled with only Catholic students. He held strongly to the

belief that Cristo Rey Philadelphia needed to reflect the diversity of our city, and the inclusion Jesus teaches us in the gospel, and foster a life of faith that respected each student's religious background. Mindful of the population he hoped to serve, our mission was distinct from every preceding Cristo Rey school and from every preceding Philadelphia Catholic school. From the inception of our mission, we have been a Catholic School for Students of All Faiths.

For the past 13 years, as a part of John's vision, I have written every senior a letter that is received on the final night of their Kairos retreat. On this three-day retreat, students are led through talks, small groups, and prayer experiences that allow them to reflect on their life through the lens of their faith. Kairos is punctuated by an evening experience called *Palanca*, which is translated in Spanish as lever, and is intended to "lift up" students through the reception of letters from loved ones. In the spirit of our 38th Kairos, which students just returned from this past Saturday, I can think of no better way to honor John's legacy than by writing him his very own retreat letter, for the first time...

Dear John,

*Many people call you a **visionary**. Others use words like **leader** or **servant**. I got to call you my boss and witness all three of those words come together in the person I shared weekly meetings with, as we nurtured the growth and sustainability of Cristo Rey. I am grateful each day for the opportunity to be a part of this mission. I don't think I ever told you this, but before my final interview with you at the offices in Bala, I pulled into a parking lot, shut my car off, and said a prayer. I had just finished grad school and all of my eggs were in one basket—probably not something a consultant from Deloitte would recommend!*

*Prayers continue to get answered every day at our school. I see it in our students and the way they engage. I see it in our team that works tirelessly for the mission. I see it in our alumni who come back from college to get a taste of the place that they called home for four years. St. Ignatius called these "moments of consolation." With your Jesuit education, you know that Ignatius also prepared us for "moments of desolation." Those are the moments when we struggle to get the mission right. And we struggle deeply because we care deeply. I often share the story about the piece of advice you gave me for those challenging moments. You said to put a post-it note on my desk with the words: "I love problems!" In full transparency, I can't say I love them yet, but I'm learning to like them, because you modeled embracing challenges so well for me.*

*John, Kairos is about things unfolding in God's time. And it is my prayer that the mission of Cristo Rey that you helped set in motion continues to be filled with Kairos moments for years to come. I am grateful to have been a part of this work with you, and someday soon will pull up to a booth at Minella's Diner to envision what the next chapter will be. See you there.*

Peace,  
Rich



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