



Father Bill Watters poses for a photo in 2017, the year he launched The Loyola School in Baltimore for children between the ages of 2 and 10. Watters turns 90 today. (Kim Hairston / Baltimore Sun)

On his 90th birthday, a look at the Rev. Bill Watters' legacy

By Joseph Lombard

In the early 1990s, Father William “Bill” Watters, a Jesuit priest, was sent to Baltimore with a discomfiting question: whether the venerable but struggling St. Ignatius Church, founded in the 1850s, should be closed. His superior made clear he favored an exit. Watters pondered the boarded-up rowhouses across from the church and noticed a plaque marking the founding of a Jesuit university and prep school on the site more than a century before.

“Let’s start another school instead,” was his report.

Born was St. Ignatius Loyola Academy, opening its doors in 1993 for middle school boys, as Watters put it, “of slender means.” The school would operate according to the Nativity model, pioneered by the Jesuits in the 1970s, with the goal of preparing kids from underperforming elementary schools for success at academically elite high schools and beyond. Tuition would be essentially free, funded by individual scholarships that the school would arrange from private donors.

Talented and dedicated teachers were the cornerstone of the Nativity model, together with longer school days, extended school years and small class sizes. To house the young teachers, Watters began buying up and renovating the forlorn rowhouses on East Madison Street. Teachers were expected to recover much-lost ground fast. This



remains true today. Recent state test results for grades 3 to 8 show that less than one in 10 Baltimore City public school students is proficient in math.

In 1997, columnist George Will visited the four-year-old school. “Enough micro-solutions,” he wrote, “and there will be no macro-problems.” The Nativity model has been proving itself in Baltimore ever since. Five hundred boys have attended the academy over three decades, with 98% going on to finish high school, often at the best prep schools in the region. Some 88% have gone on to college. As important, inspiration has flowed from Baltimore to Nativity schools across the country.

One who read the Will column was Matthew Lynch, who graduated from Georgetown in three years and tutored inmates at a correctional facility during his college sprint. Persuaded by the column, Lynch joined the academy as a teacher and moved into one of the converted East Madison rowhouses. He would eventually launch Chicago Jesuit Academy in 2005, beginning with 19 fifth-grade boys in two rented classrooms in a Chicago social services center. CJA soon acquired a decommissioned parochial school in the Austin neighborhood on the city’s West Side. More than 350 boys have graduated from CJA since it opened, and almost all have gone on to successful high school careers. CJA grads earn four-year college degrees at a rate almost 18 times their neighborhood peers. Without CJA, students from the neighborhood would likely attend one of two public elementary schools where the percentage of students performing at grade level is in the single digits. Lynch credits Watters and St. Ignatius Loyola Academy as the inspiration for CJA.

Both Watters and Lynch expanded their programmatic aims to younger children and girls in recent years. Under Lynch’s leadership, CJA doubled its footprint and began a girls’ program starting in 2022. In Baltimore, Watters launched The Loyola School in 2017, for boys and girls between the ages of 2 and 10.

Watters, who remains president of The Loyola School today, celebrates his 90th birthday today, March 1. The venue for the festivities will be a revived and vibrant St. Ignatius parish in the Mount Vernon area of Baltimore, crowned by an exquisite church restoration Watters oversaw as pastor in 1999. The occasion will recall, among other milestones, three notable schools founded in three decades by Watters, including Cristo Rey Jesuit High School with its innovative corporate work study program.

Watters will take comfort in passing the president’s torch on his birthday to The Loyola School’s second president, James Fiore. For Fiore, 39, the office will be something of a homecoming — he also lived in the East Madison rowhouses while teaching at the academy upon graduating from Villanova. Urgent tasks await, including conversion of the very same rowhouses into elementary classrooms for The Loyola School. As always, the work will include fundraising to supply scholarships for a student body that will double to more than 200 students as the elementary grades fill over the next several years.

What Watters and Fiore have going for them, though, is a value proposition that has resonated for decades with tough-minded good-hearted donors: for roughly \$17,000, they can profoundly advance the education of a child. Watters began with a conviction that all children should have the opportunity to reach their God-given potential. He and those he inspires have been fulfilling that promise for kids and families who would otherwise have few options and face long odds.

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