

BLUE BANNER

St. Michael's College School Alumni Magazine



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Man of St. Michael's: Al Brandstatter '79

St. Michael's College School has long acted as a shining beacon of light for Catholics arriving from around the world to settle in Toronto in search of a better life while remaining true to, and connected with, their faith. So, it was for George and Maria Brandstatter, who emigrated from Hungary and Austria respectively in 1950.

At the time, both countries – still attempting to recover from the devastating Second World War – were violent places coming to grips with a new communist reality under the control of the Soviet Union. In 1950, occupied Austria experienced the most dangerous wave of labour protests in its post-war history. Meanwhile, in Hungary, the state controlled most of the economy, including all mid-sized and large industrial companies, plants, mines, and banks, with many companies nationalized without any compensation. At this time, Maria had escaped from Hungary to Austria in the cover of night through a cornfield. It was in Austria, where Maria and George met and came to Toronto.

The Brandstatters' son, Albert, was born in Toronto and into a very different world in 1960. It was a world in which the family was able to openly and proudly practice their faith, and a land in which they knew hard work and consistent effort would be rewarded with a comfortable and stable life. He lived in High Park with his parents and younger sister, Sylvie.

And so it was with hopes and dreams, full of faith and ready to put in the work, that Al Brandstatter entered St. Mike's in 1974. But, were it not for his best friend from James Culnan Catholic School on Willard Avenue in West Toronto, **Leo Rautins '79**, Brandstatter would have ended up somewhere altogether different, in school and in life.

"I have known Al since 3rd Grade. I can attest to the type of man, husband, father, son, and businessman he is," shares lifelong friend Rautins. "His character, integrity, and sense of humour, are beyond reproach! He is a model SMCS man, full of goodness, discipline, and knowledge. You could put Al's face on the school crest!"

Brandstatter and Rautins' friendship continued to grow throughout elementary school so much so that by the end of it, Rautins was providing him with some sage educational advice.

"In Grade 8, we had to select which high school we wished to attend and I had selected Humber College because it was



Brandstatter with childhood friend, **Leo Rautins '79**.

less than 500 yards from my home," recalls Brandstatter. "When Leo saw my selection, he scratched it out with his pen and wrote in St. Michael's College School. I had never even heard of SMCS! That night I went home and, as my dad was preparing to leave for his night shift at the Ford Motor Company in Oakville, I asked if I could attend St. Mike's instead of Humber College. I made sure to tell him it was a Catholic school. He was elated at my choice! The rest is history."

His father was right to be elated and he would not be disappointed when it came to the ability of St. Mike's, and in particular, the priests on staff, to nurture and grow the faith that lived within his son.

"I can still remember my Religion classes with the late **Fr. Zinger, CSB, OSM** and learning about the Old and New Testaments," says Brandstatter, settling in for a doozy of a story. "I remember Fr. Zinger in Grade 9 asking me to read to the class – from that podium he had at the front of the classroom – a modern translation of the Bible. The specific reading was the story of the second of the 10 plagues wrought upon Pharaoh and the Egyptians; the plague of the frogs. I can't remember the exact words, but the story involved automobiles running over frogs, squishing the poor, helpless amphibians, resulting in greasy, slimy roads, and the cars sliding, swerving, and smashing into each other. Like I said, it was a 'modern translation.' As I read this passage to the class, I began to laugh, and then laugh uncontrollably. The entire class began to howl! I couldn't get through the remainder of the reading because I was crying from laughter and my belly ached. I guess you had to be there, but this reading somehow was the beginning of helping me understand the Bible – believe it or not!

“Also, to this day, I still remember Fr. Zinger’s definition of a virtue and his descriptions of faith, hope, patience, temperance, charity, and humility. In Grade 12, Fr. Foy, CSB, helped me comprehend the Apostles Creed and the Nicene Creed, prior to which I simply recited mindlessly. And Fr. Hibberd ’88, CSB, OSM brought everything together by sharing his personal life experiences and illuminating for us the difference between making choices the world expects from us and the choices which are ultimately wise! Choices that are never regrettable! Which other school can claim to provide such mentorship?”

What Brandstatter found was that, as his faith continued to grow after graduating from St. Mike’s, his career began to flourish. Taking care to apply the lessons he had been taught by Fr. Zinger and Fr. Hibberd, Brandstatter was able to experience joy and success in his career. Another person who expanded on or reinforced these lessons was Paul Henderson, of Team Canada ’72 fame. Brandstatter met Henderson in 2002, after joining Henderson’s LeaderImpact Group, a ministry for professional men that assists with spiritual direction and knowledge to apply God’s foundation to not only their professional but personal lives. The group follows Proverbs 27:7 “As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another.” After being a part of Henderson’s group for 10 years and meeting weekly for 90 minutes, he is proud to share he now hosts his own group with 10 members from all walks of life.

October 1985 was a big month for Brandstatter, not only did he and his now wife Carolyn become engaged, he became a stockbroker at the age of 25 – which he admits was way too young, but he has learned a lot throughout the years. Brandstatter began his career with a short stay at Bache Securities located at King and Yonge before moving to Dominion Securities Pitfield (now RBC) for eight years, followed by a 10-year stint at TD. He joined National Bank Financial (NBF) in 2003 and proudly states he has never been happier.



Enjoying a meal with wife, Carolyn.

“I have received numerous awards in my professional career, including National Bank Financial’s most prestigious award, NBF Investment Advisor of the Year, in 2010,” Brandstatter states, before dropping the bomb. “Being this edition’s Man of St. Michael’s means more to me than any of my professional accolades. I have always read the bios and accomplishments of previous Men of St. Michael’s and had great admiration for these men and held them in high esteem. Never did I imagine that I could be counted among them! Truly, the biggest honour of my life!”



During the pandemic, Brandstatter assisted at a local food bank.

“Well, Al is living proof that academic excellence is more than just making good grades,” jokes Rautins. “He’d still be in 9th Grade math if not for me - and I was terrible in math!”

Obviously, Brandstatter is thankful for the time he spent at St. Michael’s, the way his faith was nurtured with love and care, yes, but also for other reasons. While he knew his faith would be important throughout his life, there were other benefits to his time at St. Mike’s which had not been expected, and this is another reason why his love for the school is so strong.

“The great and amazing thing about SMCS is that the school’s alumni stick together and help each other, regardless of the graduation year,” states Brandstatter as he warms up for another barn burner. “Let me give you a personal example. Back in 1993, a business associate referred to me a very successful entrepreneur. I called the gentleman and we agreed to have lunch together. Well, the lunch did not have a promising beginning. This man’s name was Joe Boccia ’54, and he was 22 years older than me. I was 33 and my goal was to have him entrust me with his life savings. Fat chance that was going to happen! I knew I was losing him so I began to try to find some bond of commonality. I asked him where he grew up and he replied in the ‘St. Clair and Dufferin area.’ I then said I went to a high school nearby. Joe asked me which school and I proudly replied, ‘St. Michael’s College School.’ Joe’s eyes lit up and said that he too went to St. Mike’s. Long story short, not only did Joe entrust me with his life savings, but he introduced me to the wealthiest people in his industry, all of whom gradually opened accounts with me. Joe changed the direction of my business career and also sponsored me into his golf club,



Frank Mahovich '57, OSM and Brandstatter catching up at the 2018 SMCS golf tournament.

The National Golf Club of Canada, where I have developed many lasting friendships. All because of St. Michael's College School. Truly remarkable!"

What is equally remarkable is Brandstatter's uncanny ability to dig an entrancing story for any occasion out of his considerable arsenal. Asked for some of his favourite high school memories and he unleashes a torrent of unbridled joy.

"So many memories of SMCS, some shareable, some not," he laughs. "Leo Rautins at Michael Power cheering on the Kerry Blues. You'll have to ask Leo about that one! As I recall, it resulted in a three-day suspension and Mr. Shanahan needing new pants and shoes. So hilarious! I remember each one of my homeroom teachers and could give you a story about either the teacher or a student in that class. Grade 9 – Mr. Marty Story, English; Grade 10 – Mr. Paul Crawford, Geography; Grade 11 – Fr. Neil Hibberd, Religion; Grade 12 – Mr. Jack Fenn '54, OSM, Geography; Grade 13 – Mr. Tony 'Grizzly' Adams, Algebra.

"I'll give you one which is sort of related to my career. In Grade 13, I had invested my paper route money into shares of Electrohome, a company that has been around for over 100 years and the first developer of projection TVs for sports bars. Since I was a shareholder, I was entitled to go to the annual meeting at the company's headquarters in Kitchener. I remember going to Room 214 to ask our vice principal, Hugh McDougall, OSM, for permission since it meant I would be absent the entire day. Hugh thought it was a great idea, but I had to share something of value with my homeroom class and he'd ensure that 'Grizzly' would be questioning me for that info.

"When I arrived at the company's headquarters, the Atari game, Asteroids, was on display. Electrohome had received Asteroids as a gift from Atari because it was this Canadian company's

technology that developed the technological advancements which made the arcade video screen possible. Now, I had often played Asteroids at the various pinball and video game establishments on Yonge St. just north of Dundas, but at Electrohome, it was FREE! Needless to say, I spent the entire day playing Asteroids! But, I learnt something of value to share with my Grade 13 Algebra class. Now it just happened that around that time we were studying parabolic formulae, which I had thought had zero value in the real world. I was so wrong! The light and sound from the Electrohome projection TVs were directed from a projector suspended from the sports bar's ceiling towards a parabolic screen. Not only was the light reflected back to the patrons, but the sound was reflected back as well. In that way, the sound seemed to originate from the screen while in actuality it was about 20 feet in front of the screen. The parabolic equation had to be precise for everything to appear to be originating from the screen. Very cool indeed...and homework assignment completed!"

Brandstatter was equally enthusiastic and verbose when asked for any memories of his favourite teachers and personalities from his time at St. Mike's.



L to R; Vic Simkus '79, Brandstatter, Patrick Fradley-Davis '77, and Greg Hook '80 at a SMCS golf tournament pre-pandemic.



Brandstatter is all smiles with daughter, Vienna.

“Fr. Zinger taking pictures of every class from every year, and photos of various students, and pinning them on every available square inch of his class. I also fondly remember his gentleness and profound love of Christ! **Mr. Yonder’s ’56** passion for literary works of art and contorting his body and motioning with his arms while describing something special that he wished for us to appreciate and comprehend. **Fr. Holmes, ’48, CSB** and his gravelly voice and making Calculus so easy to understand... until I had to write a test or an exam and I realized this would not be my forte in life! Mr. ‘Grizzly’ Adams – scared the living you know what out of every Grade 9 student on the first day of class. I still remember being so terrified that first day. Turns out ‘Grizzly’ was just a ‘Gentle Ben’! And Fr. Hibberd – sharing his life experiences and succeeding in the seemingly impossible task of making Latin come to life!”

With such fond memories of St. Michael’s, it is perhaps not surprising that he has remained quite involved with the school since his graduation. **John Bonvivere ’50, Hub Teolis ’42** (both now deceased), **Dennis Caponi ’86, Michael Duffy ’65, OSM**, and Brandstatter worked very hard in the early 90s assembling an

alumni directory and managing several scholarship fundraising drives. He also worked on the SMCS Alumni Golf Committee for several years in the 90s. From 2003-15, Brandstatter served on the school’s Foundation Investment Committee and continues to act as an advisor.

Brandstatter believes that the faith-based education, outstanding teachers and mentors, and strict adherence to the school’s motto set St. Mike’s apart. But there is another element necessary for the alchemy to be complete.

“Ultimately, it’s such a special place because once you have graduated and then periodically return, you then begin to appreciate how truly wonderful a high school it is, and how it’s more than just ‘a place’. I attended the University of Toronto for my post-secondary education and I have run into many other U of T graduates over the years. But, it has no meaning, no sense of affiliation or fraternity. There’s something very special about SMCS, as the brotherhood transcends the actual physical building. It’s a family!”

Since Brandstatter’s memorable introduction to the Plagues of Pharaoh and lessons learned with his LeaderImpact Group, he has gotten to know scripture, “Just for fun and to exercise my brain, I memorize a passage every month,” shares Brandstatter. “I am able to recite well over 150 verses, and practice those verses every few days.” When Brandstatter isn’t investing, golfing, or memorizing Bible verses, he along with Carolyn, and their children Vienna, an actress, and Alec, pilot in training, call Mississauga home.



A proud Brandstatter poses with his son, Alec.