Reflections of a St. Mary School Alumnus

"Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these." (Matthew 19:14) Jesus boldly and definitively states that the kingdom of heaven belongs to children, in all their wonderful simplicity and innocence. Cultivating an educational environment in which children can truly thrive and become virtuous, joyous individuals has never been more important. In an age in which classical education becomes increasingly rare, St. Mary School in Charlevoix is dedicated to the good, the true, and the beautiful. For 120 years, the school has been a pillar of Catholic education in Northern Michigan, and the halls still ring with the music of laughter and small voices. The school is not only a rock of Catholic education, but a joyous, overflowing hub of learning and life. To walk through the classrooms and witness the excitement and care of both students and teachers is a real joy, and as we at St. Mary School strive to campaign for student scholarships this December, we thought it especially fitting to bring you a first-hand account of the school's impact from one of our local alumni: Charles Strehl.

Charles Strehl attended St. Mary from 2001-2008, while the Middle School was still a dream of parents and teachers, putting in the unseen work so that the school could eventually expand, offering 6th-8th grade classrooms in 2011. After studying business at Michigan State University, Charles now works as an entrepreneur, and has returned to give his talents to the school many times.

He reflects fondly on his time at St. Mary, remembering especially teachers Joe Solomon and Kathleen Dvoracek. Both are still teaching at St. Mary, and Mrs. Dvoracek has been the school's Principal since 2012. Their respective styles and temperaments made an impression on him as a student. He says, "They each had their own way of teaching. Back when I was in school you knew 5th grade was coming because of the intense workload Kathleen would put on her 4th graders. It was kind of an introduction to middle school." And about teacher Joe Solomon, Charles remembers: "Joe Solomon was able to connect with us, there was a trust; where we wanted to get to as a class." Charles says that spending the entire year with one teacher in such small classes built a wonderful familiarity and ethos with each teacher and their style.

His gratitude for the gift of Catholic education shines through in our brief conversation, even years later. He attests to the influence of being surrounded by the rites and rituals of his faith from an early age, saying he is left to this day with a feeling of deep familiarity with the Church. He doesn't have to ask what a certain liturgical season celebrates; he was taught the richness and meaning of his Catholic culture. Students still attend weekly Mass on Wednesdays, and the privilege of such proximity to the sacraments is surely one of the reasons the students walk with such high heads and kind attitudes. Charles's testimony brings more than the immediate effects to light, pointing out that being surrounded by the richness of his faith as a student gave him a foundation that has lasted a lifetime.

On the decision to choose Catholic education for one's children, he reflects:
"From K-12 Catholic education, the commitment my parents made to make that happen was

large; seeing the commitment current parents are making is something I recommend and support. I understand why you're making this choice."

The school is entering a joyous and busy season of athletics, fundraisers, and student activities. In this time of preparation for holiday celebrations, St. Mary School joins millions across the country to take part in Giving Tuesday. The Tuesday after Thanksgiving is a national day of generosity, and St. Mary is proud to be campaigning to raise $20,000 for student scholarships. A Christ-centered education that prioritizes cultivating the whole person: body, mind, and soul, is a privilege that many Northern Michiganders have enjoyed; with your help, more students than ever could have access to this life-changing education. Join us, and donate before or on Giving Tuesday, December 1st.

St. Mary School wishes you a very merry Christmas and Happy New Year, God bless!