

LONG ISLAND

REKINDLING THE LA SALLE SPIRIT

Shuttered academy's alumni thanked for helping start school for boys in Freeport



The De La Salle School in Freeport is honoring alumni of the closed La Salle Military Academy for helping launch the fifth- to eighth-grade school for disadvantaged youth.

BY BART JONES
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When La Salle Military Academy in Oakdale closed in June 2001, the Christian Brothers who ran it were left without a presence — and a school — on Long Island for the first time in decades.

So the brothers, backed by a group of the academy's alumni, decided to open a small school that would focus on Latino and African-American boys in grades five through eight from impoverished families.

This Easter season, The De La Salle School in Freeport is honoring those supporters for their role in the resurrection of the Christian Brothers' spirit and work on the Island and for giving hope and a vital boost to boys in challenging socio-economic circumstances.

"When many people had lost hope and thought the La Sallian

tradition would not be a force on Long Island, The De La Salle School blossomed to really serve the . . . poor and the marginalized," said William L. Gault, the school's executive director. "We really literally have life" because of the military academy's alumni.

Some of those backers were on the school's founding board and many remain major donors. The school, with an enrollment of 69, is gearing up to honor them at its annual gala on June 1.

On Easter Sunday, hundreds of thousands of Christians on Long Island will flock to churches for what they consider the holiest day of the year to celebrate the resurrection of Jesus Christ and the new life it promises for the faithful. Christians believe that Jesus rose from the dead on the third day after his crucifixion some 2,000 years ago by the Romans at Calvary, on

what is known as Good Friday.

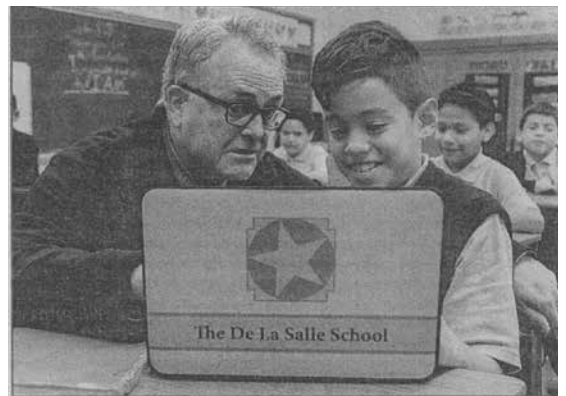
The De La Salle School, now in its 16th year, is an example of the new life that Jesus' resurrection promises, according to administrators, parents and alumni of the school.

Most head for college

In an area where public school systems such as that in Hempstead — where many of De La Salle's students come from — have graduation rates of 40 percent or less, virtually every alumnus of the Christian Brothers' school has graduated from high school or is in the process of doing so, said Brother Thomas Casey, who headed the school from 2002 to 2016 and before that was principal of the military academy.

Most of the alumni go on to college, he said.

"From that angle, just on statistics alone, it is cause for rejoicing," Casey said.

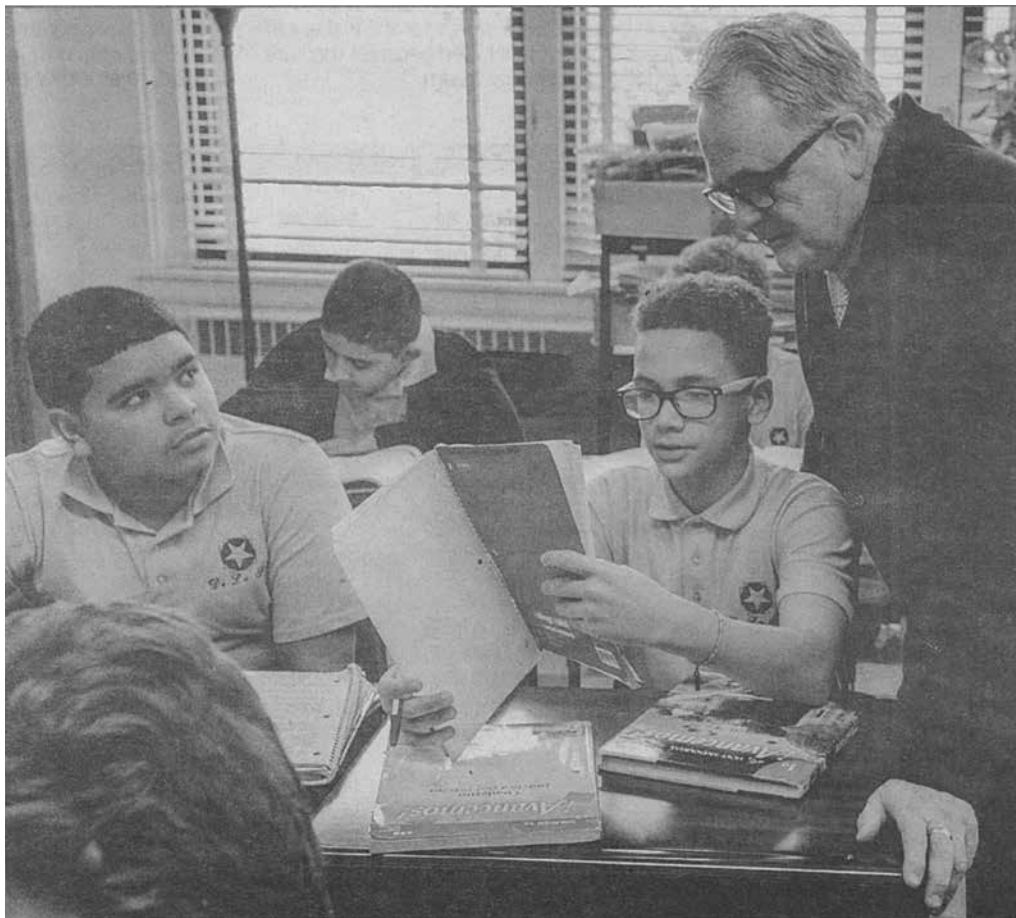


Executive director William Gault with a fifth-grader as he works on a Chromebook at The De La Salle School on Tuesday.

Currently, two De La Salle graduates are studying at the elite Regis High School in Manhattan, a Jesuit-run, tuition-free honors school that is one of the

most competitive in the city in which to land a spot.

"I give thanks to God for allowing me to get to know De La Salle," Jose Turcios, the father of



JEFF BACHNER

Executive director Gault with students during class at The De La Salle School on Tuesday.

Ranulfo, 14, now a freshman at Regis, said in Spanish.

"We can say this is a miracle," said Turcios, a handyman from El Salvador who lives in Roosevelt. "This school made possible what I didn't think was possible."

The De La Salle School is part of a network of small schools in poor neighborhoods that are run by the Christian Brothers or by the Jesuits, who operate the Nativity Mission Center on Manhattan's Lower East Side. Sometimes referred to as San Miguel Schools, they provide high-quality education to children who otherwise might be stuck in underperforming public schools.

The schools are not tuition-driven, because the household incomes of the students' families generally are at or below the poverty line. They depend on fundraising and grants. The Freeport school charges families \$80 a month per student, if they can afford it.

Most of the students, past and present, are the sons of immigrant families from a total of 19 countries — mostly from the Dominican Republic, but also from Haiti and elsewhere in Latin America — along with

boys from African-American families.

The support of the military academy alumni has been essential to keeping The De La Salle School alive. The school's budget is about \$1 million a year, and the military academy alumni provide as much as \$100,000 of that, said Marty Bevilacqua of Rockville Centre, a leader of that alumni organization.

"They wanted to keep the Christian Brothers' legacy alive on Long Island," Gault said. "They are a critical component to who we are."

Alumni met after 9/11

Bevilacqua recalled how the brothers and some of the military academy alumni held a meeting on Sept. 12, 2001, the day after the terrorist attacks in New York City and Washington, and discussed resurrecting the La Salle ministry and mission on Long Island.

The military academy, which opened in the Bronx in 1883, had operated on a 175-acre campus overlooking the Great South Bay in Oakdale since the mid-1920s. For most of that time, it was an all-boys boarding institution and attracted the

scions of wealthy Catholic families from across the United States and from other countries.

It closed June 30, 2001, beset by declining enrollment and financial troubles.

At the meeting a day after the terrorist attacks, "we sat at the table all devastated from the day before and said, from the bad of that, we have to do something good," Bevilacqua said. "It's hopeful."

The De La Salle School, which he described as "starting from the ashes of 9/11," opened in September 2002.

Bevilacqua said he has seen the odds many of the boys face.

In the school's first year, he sponsored one student by paying his monthly tuition. After the boy graduated from De La Salle, he enrolled in a local public high school. But before he graduated, he was shot and killed by a gang member, Bevilacqua said.

"The risk is out there for these boys," he said.

The De La Salle School is "a safe haven for our kids," Gault said. "This is a true mission, because you are providing hope for these kids. Education is their way out of poverty."