

# A passionate leader.

in Catholic education





**T**om Maj (pronounced May) made it through his youth without ever purchasing a pair of bell bottoms. He was a child when Vatican II came along, but fondly recalls the Latin Mass and remains drawn to the more solemn rituals of the Catholic Church.

>> Maj was a constant presence on the Catholic Central High School campus, wearing his trademark button-down shirts and dress slacks.



# A

s a high school teacher and, more recently as assistant principal at Grand Rapids Catholic Central High School, Maj likewise has not been one to chase the latest trends in education. He has an uncompromising commitment to Catholic education, which he says is rooted in 2,000 years of Catholic intellectual tradition.

Maj, who assumed responsibilities as the new principal of West Catholic High School in Grand Rapids on July 1, sees the role of Catholic schools not to provide self-esteem for self-esteem's sake or job training.

"I tell people all the time, the advantage of Catholic schools is that they tend to take a transformative view of students, which is different from other school settings," said Maj. "They not only care about what you know, but they also care about what you become."

Diocesan leaders are banking on this old-school educator to inject new life into Catholic secondary education at a time when economic troubles and competition present challenges.

"The Catholic Secondary School Board has been determined to raise the bar academically for our two schools.

That's integral to our being a Catholic institution," said Rev. R. Louis Stasker, pastor/president of Catholic Secondary Schools in the Diocese of Grand Rapids. "We need people who are able to think analytically, able to discern, and that goes for their faith life as well as their societal life. Tom is very much that type of person. He's not soft on what it means to be a Christian. He's very clear about what a Christian life is and he raises the bar for the students he works with."

### 'A good little soldier'

An "army brat," Maj was born on Sept. 8, 1959, in Gary, Ind., to a military family. They would move to McLean, Va., where his father worked at the nearby Pentagon. After Maj's

father retired from the military, the family moved to Cincinnati, where Maj spent most of his formative years.

Raised Catholic, Maj and his family observed Sunday Mass and holy days. Unlike many in his generation, Maj was not swept up by the cultural shifts of the 1960s and '70s.

"I was a good little soldier," said Maj, who considers himself a bit of an anachronism. "I did what my father told me to do. I did what my church told me to do. And I didn't question a lot of it. I just did what I thought was expected of me. If that's my faith journey, it is."

Maj did not feel the need to look for "signs."

"The sign was, 'If you don't do this, this is the consequence.' That sign kept flashing bright and loud and clear in front of me. It was a good life and I wouldn't trade it for anything," Maj said.

His years at St. Vivian Catholic School in Cincinnati shaped his outlook and his faith. The school and his parents provided discipline and high expectations. Maj remembers what happened one Friday when he came home without homework.

"My dad called our elementary principal on a Monday. He said, 'What do you mean by sending my kid home without any homework?' I said, 'Thanks a lot, Dad.'"

He laughs about it now, but those experiences instilled values that Maj would carry into his adult life. Indirectly, the nuns and priests at St. Vivian also instilled in Maj the importance of using one's knowledge to make a contribution.

"When I look back (at) St. Vivian, my life would be completely different without that experience," he added.

>> Grand Rapids Catholic Central High School students give Maj farewell hugs during his last day on the CCHS campus.



**“I was a good little soldier,” said Maj, who considers himself a bit of an anachronism. “I did what my father told me to do. I did what my church told me to do. And I didn’t question a lot of it. I just did what I thought was expected of me. If that’s my faith journey, it is.”**

## From selling diapers to changing lives

Maj would go on to attend Catholic and later public high school when his parents moved out of the city. He graduated from the University of Cincinnati with a political science degree in 1983 and then landed a good job as an underwriter at Cincinnati Financial. The young professional decided to volunteer for a program called Cincinnati Experience. He would tutor one or two public school students in their homes in the Cincinnati projects on weekends.

"It got to the point where I was looking forward more and more to working with those students," recalled Maj. "I was doing well in my job and I liked it, but it didn't provide the same kind of satisfaction that working with students did."

Maj would move on to a stint "selling diapers" for Procter & Gamble Co. after a serendipitous chat with a company representative while waiting for a tennis court. He later moved to Michigan, to take a job directing international programs at Ferris State University



>> Maj and Cindy Sielawa, vice president for advancement at Grand Rapids West Catholic High School spend a mid-July afternoon coordinating schedules in preparation for Maj's first year as principal at the school.

in Big Rapids. While working there, Maj earned his teaching certificate. He also met his wife, Natalie, an elementary-school teacher. When FSU shut down the international program, Maj and his wife moved to Reed City, where he taught high-school government.

"It was about a million-plus miles away from where I came from," recalled Maj, who grew up in relatively large cities. "It was a good experience. I remember it fondly."

Maj, who was named Reed City Teacher of the Year, remains in contact with a number of former students and takes pride in the "small army" of young

people he mentored as they went on to military academies. After 10 years in the classroom, Maj decided to move into administration. It was a natural progression for the educator who began as a tutor.

"If I can have a positive influence on two kids, what could I do with a classroom of kids?" he recalled thinking when he became a teacher. Similarly, as an administrator, he could have an impact on several hundred.

Maj compared his job as assistant principal at CCHS to spinning plates on a stick. He handled student discipline, academics, parent meetings and parking lot duty. Through it all,



>> Maj talks with a student at CCHS.

his goal was to bring a “transformative” view of education, even when having a 30-second conversation with a student.

“As a teacher, Tom is more interested in helping a student think than having a student memorize,” Father Stasker said. “There is a risk in this approach, but it opens up a dialogue that is so important in Catholic school education. It’s not merely a matter of multiplication tables or rote learning, but being able to think which is even more critical. Rote has a place, but once learned, it should free us up to do deeper thinking.”

Maj was a constant presence on the Catholic Central High School campus, wearing his trademark button-down shirts and dress slacks. Whether greeting students at the door or directing traffic, he always had a kind word, Father Stasker said.

“Tom has a calm manner, a self confidence about his own personal direction that helps every young person he deals with,” Father Stasker added. “He has a patience which empowers him to put the little things in life in proper perspective and focus on the larger issues.”

## A new chapter begins

Maj now lives in Rockford with Natalie and their child. The family attends Mass at the Cathedral of Saint Andrew. As principal of West Catholic, Maj hopes to foster the Catholic intellectual tradition he cherishes. That tradition is at the heart of Catholic education and identity, he believes.

**“Why and in what way is education vital for people? ... For me, Catholic schools have stayed very true to the correct answer to that question: It is only through education that you can cultivate the ability of people to think; so that down the road they can go out and do the work of the world, as distinguished from going out and being trained in something.”**

“Is West Catholic or Catholic Central Catholic because it has Catholic in its name?” asks Maj. “Well it’s important but it’s not enough ... For a

school to be Catholic, in my estimation, it has to be intellectual. The church provides us with 2,000 years of intellectual and theological wisdom that is at the very root of what Catholic schools do.”

That tradition is what sets Catholic schools apart, Maj said.

“Why and in what way is education vital for people?” he asks. “For me, Catholic schools have stayed very true to the correct answer to that question: It is only through education that you can cultivate the ability of people to think; so that down the road they can go out and do the work of the world, as distinguished from going out and being trained in something.”

Maj goes back to the nuns and priests at St. Vivian, who instilled in him the “transformative” nature of Catholic education.

“What’s going to define us as successful is what our students become and what they end up doing,” Maj said. “Are their marriages stronger? Are they good ethical businessmen and women? Are they good ethical and moral physicians? Do they have a contribution to make and do they make that contribution to their communities? That, to me, defines Catholic education – that transformative view of what you can become.”

Whether tutoring students, teaching high school government or handling traffic patrol, Maj works to help students grow into adults who not only excel but contribute to society at-large. As principal at West Catholic, it will give me a chance to carry that message to even more students, Maj said.

“For me it’s an opportunity to continue to make Catholic education viable in West Michigan,” he added “Catholic education is a national treasure. It’s not something I want to lose.”

That passion for Catholic education comes through in everything Maj does, said Dr. Bernard Stanko, superintendent of Catholic elementary education at the Diocese of Grand Rapids, who also has served as both an assistant principal at Catholic Central and principal at West Catholic.

“It’s not just a job for him,” Stanko said. “He’s a man who’s very strong in his own faith. He lives it. This job for him is an extension of his faith.” ☺



➤ Maj works in his new office on the West Catholic campus.