By Madeline Clark
Senior Editor

On a gray, chilly, Vermont winter morning, Lorraine Sterritt, Ph.D., walked into Founders’ Hall with a broad smile. It was her first visit to St. Michael’s College after accepting the position of president. A light snow fell outside, in contrast to the 30 degree temperatures she had left at her current workplace, Salem Academy and College, in North Carolina. Sterritt traveled from Salem to introduce herself to the students, faculty, and staff of St. Michael’s College. Before heading to a community forum on Jan. 30, she took time to talk to The Defender about her vision and priorities for the college when she moves into the president’s house and takes the reins in July.

Q: SMC was looking for a visionary president…can you share a glimpse of your vision with us?
A: We need to be out there boldly explaining why education matters and why it’s important, and supporting both [the] subjects that have been around forever, and the new things. Philosophy and data science can coexist. It’s not enough just to do [academic and campus improvements] you have to tell the world that you are doing it.

Q: Fundraising is an essential element of your role at SMC. How will you go about that and what else will you prioritize?
A: I currently spend a lot of my time both cultivating donors and making asks of them. I use every piece of skill I have as a linguist to inspire them. I use every piece of skill you also have students from a lot of students from the New England area, but students from New England?
A: I think here you have a lot of students from New England area, but you also have students from a lot of different places. I really believe in coming at things from multiple perspectives. I’m very much a “both” and “and” person rather than an “either” or “or” person. I believe in recruiting locally, nationally, and internationally as well. We’re all very well served when we have people from everywhere.

Q: There is a very different climate (both literally and culturally) between North Carolina and Vermont What do you anticipate will be the difference between students from the South and students from New England?
A: I think here you have a lot of students from the New England area, but you also have students from a lot of different places. I really believe in coming at things from multiple perspectives. I’m very much a “both” and “and” person rather than an “either” or “or” person. I believe in recruiting locally, nationally, and internationally as well. We’re all very well served when we have people from everywhere.

Q: Your husband, Bert, will be joining you here in Vermont. Will he play an active role on campus?
A: He is the most active person on campus [in Salem]. In fact over this weekend, after the announcement went out, I got the cutest email from a student of Salem. She said, “Although it’s very sad that you’re leaving and I wish you all the very best in your new school, I’m writing to ask you does this mean that Bert will be going too, and not teaching here next fall?” Everybody knows Bert. He’s a total campus rat. He will be very much part of the community. He’s a very chatty, friendly guy with people. We’ll be at concerts and plays and sporting events. We love the whole campus spirit. Love it. Love it.

Q: This is a challenging time in the college’s history. The freshman class, at 385 students, is incredibly small. How do you think you will tackle this challenge?
A: We’ll have to recruit, recruit, recruit. Most liberal arts colleges [are] facing the same thing. So, I think it’s not at all unusual. Historically, I think a lot of colleges have been a bit on the shy side about getting out there and telling their story. That’s just what we have to do nowadays. Of course we engage consultants to help us with this. In addition, I think we need to marshal the troops of our current students, [and] our alumni. We just need to excite them about going out and spreading the word too.

Q: There were student sit-ins at Salem due to racial tensions; we have had similar occurrences here at St. Michael’s. How will you address these issues?
A: Last year was a really difficult year for colleges, regardless of one’s politics. The country was divided, and it showed up on college campuses. Yes, we had racial tensions [at Salem]. We handled it by talking with the students, by having meetings with the students, hearing about the things that were on their minds. In North Carolina we had not just racial tensions but HB2, a law regarding use of bathrooms by transgendered people. Our students protested that and we [Salem College] also issued a statement, opposing HB2 as discriminatory. The way we come to understandings is by talking. There will always be differences of opinion. You have to talk that through. When things cross a line into discrimination, like HB2, that’s not acceptable.

Q: Will you receive a salary that is commensurate with that of President Neuhauser’s?
A: The Board Chair and I have agreed on my salary.

Q: Will you bring a new administration with you?
A: Administrative positions will be filled as they become open.

Q: Is there anything you would want us to know?
A: My husband and I are both thrilled to be coming to St. Michael’s. We are both devoted to the Catholic mission of education and service, and we look forward to attending mass with the St. Michael’s community.