

'Recruit, recruit, recruit.' A glimpse of Sterritt's vision

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 50 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 co-exist. 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 to believe in what we're doing. My approach to fundraising is a combination of very careful research and then a very personalized approach. I go one investor at a time. I think the key is inspiring the donor so that by the end of the conversation the donor really wants to write a check for that project. When I come here I will spend time talking with faculty, staff, and students to assess where the most urgent needs are for fundraising.

Q: Your background is in French, how did you get savoir-faire in finance?

A: When I was in high school I really thought I was weird because I loved French and I loved math. It was only years later I realized that makes sense

because you're using the same parts of your brain. As I moved into positions of more and more responsibility, there was more and more of a finance component in the jobs. I came to the realization that a service to an institution could be a person who bridges the academics and the finances. I have a Ph.D. in Renaissance French Literature. I've been a CFO [Chief Financial Officer]. I'm someone who bridges both.



PHOTO BY EVA WILTON
President John "Jack" Neuhauser and President-designate Lorraine Sterritt talk outside the Durick Library on Jan. 30.

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" person rather than an "either" "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: You said you like the Edmundite Mission...how do you see that mission and how will you participate in it?

A: I really admire what the Edmundites have done in Selma, Ala. for example, and in New Orleans--service to humanity. What I love about the Edmundites is that they bring together education and service. It's not education over here, your life and service

way over here. It's really important in many roles on campus but especially in the president's role to be an ambassador for that mission. That means it's the guiding principle for every decision large or small that gets made. You know, college presidents are called upon to make very complex decisions and my philosophy is: do the right thing for the right reason.

Q: Are you a practicing Catholic?

A: I am High Church Anglican. I grew

up in Ireland, which is very close to the [Roman] Catholic Church. I am very much engaged in Catholic principles.

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 alums. 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, 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.☺

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