

# ANSWERING A CALL:

## *President and Mrs. DiSalvo Share How Marian Changes Lives (Including Their Own)*

**By Monica M. Walk**

Sometimes you feel a higher power tap you on the shoulder. That “tap” may take the form of a telephone call from a long-time mentor, but the unexpected contact redirects your life path in a way that — while previously unanticipated — now feels clear and right.

Marian University's 14th president, Steven R. DiSalvo, Ph.D., accepted the call to university leadership by first answering the phone.

Bellarmino University President Dr. Joseph J. McGowan wanted DiSalvo

to know about the presidential opportunity at Marian because he knew DiSalvo so well. Two decades ago, McGowan had observed DiSalvo's professional trajectory at Fordham University where McGowan was the long-time vice president for student affairs and DiSalvo earned triple degrees: a B.S. in psychology, an M.B.A. in marketing, and a Ph.D. in educational leadership with a focus on student retention.

The experienced educator and administrator saw how DiSalvo's career choices in business (*IBM*), education (*Fordham, Loyola and Fairfield universities, Junior Achievement*), and fundraising and philanthropy management (*Fairfield University, Joe Torre Safe at Home Foundation, The Hopewell Group, Inc.*) make him a presidential candidate in a new mold: Steve DiSalvo understands the business of education, and what makes young people tick.

After only 11 weeks in office and in town, President DiSalvo and his wife, Eileen, welcomed me into their warm and family-focused Fond du Lac residence. We sat around the kitchen table and shared why Marian University resonated with them, and how they discovered home half a continent away from their New York City roots.

**MW:** You've been quoted in local news outlets as saying Fond du Lac 'already feels like home.' Describe what feels like home to you.

**SD:** We most recently lived in a town of 57,000 (*Milford, CT*), so this is the size of town we are used to. But, it's the people. This place is so welcoming in every way. That makes it feel like home, and has made the transition easier. My parents, who live in Milford, brought our three boys here after we settled into the house. My parents were nervous about us not being close to them anymore. But once they were here, they said 'We can see why you did this.'

**ED:** People are friendly, open and warm. It's a combination of things. We most recently came from a similar community, with neighbors and friends close by. I like to know my neighbors, yet we have the perfect blend of both privacy and community here. Steve and I grew up in New York neighborhoods — Flushing, Queens for Steve, Bayside for me — with lots of trees and children on the block.

**SD:** Having lived and worked in New York City, I know there can be 8 million people on the island of Manhattan at any given time. By comparison, we have 5 million here in the entire state of Wisconsin. We have open space, and it is easier to





get around. With our home three-and-a-half miles from campus, I appreciate that I can see my family while taking care of the university, even if there are evening commitments. An evening commitment on the East Coast meant I left at 5:30 a.m. and didn't get back home until 11:30 p.m. I call Fond du Lac 'Shangri La'.... we can visit Milwaukee, Madison, Chicago, and come home to this community.

**MW:** *How have you helped your sons settle in?*

**SD:** We got the house ready first, before they joined us. I think that helped.

**ED:** And we let them make their own choices about school. Thomas, 17, has returned to Connecticut to finish his senior year of high school. Andrew, 14, is a freshman at St. Mary's Springs Academy High School. And Connor, 12, is in seventh grade at Sabish Middle School, which felt most similar to the school he came from.

**SD:** I'm a sports nut — my first job at 16 was as a vendor in Shea Stadium — and I created sports nuts in my sons. We have always taken them to sporting events, like Yankee and Mets games, and the U.S. Tennis Open. Right after we moved here, I took Tom and Connor to the P.G.A. event at Whistling Straits. We do sporting events like this — and vacations to places like Williamsburg, Boston, Niagara Falls and Disney — to make memories.

**MW:** *What were your impressions of the Midwest before your arrival here?*

**ED:** We knew from our four years in Mt. Prospect, IL, while Steve worked as executive assistant to the president of Loyola University in Chicago, that people generally were friendly, and that has held true.

**SD:** I like to tell the story of getting lost on my way to my first meeting in downtown Chicago. I stopped on a street corner, pulled out a map — and a person stopped to help and was describing how to get where I needed to be. Then he said, 'I'm going that way — I'll walk you there.' My New York antenna went up, and I thought it was a scam. But, he was so nice and talked to me the whole way, then shook my hand and wished me well. I went into my meeting and shared, in some disbelief, what I had just experienced. A new colleague said, 'Honey, that's just good Midwestern hospitality.'

**MW:** *Have you done a full Wisconsin immersion: eaten a brat, tried cheese curds, attended a Packers game?*

**ED:** Brats and cheese curds, but no Packers game yet.

**SD:** I toured a cheese factory and saw how string cheese is made. It was fascinating. And, I will root for the Packers as a resident — until the Giants play at Lambeau Field. I do have allegiances to my teams.

**MW:** *How has your path together led to work in education, both individually and together?*

**ED:** My undergraduate degree is in business marketing, and I worked in the business world before we became parents. I always wanted to teach, so I went back to school to get a master's degree while we lived in Illinois. I would drive to Loyola's education campus in Wilmette in the evening with baby Thomas in the car. Steve would meet me there, and we would switch cars so he could take the baby home. Last year, I worked full time as a paraprofessional in a kindergarten classroom. I am certified in Connecticut to teach Kindergarten-grade 6.

**SD:** Since Eileen is also an educator, she fits in and understands the culture here.

I initially thought I was on a long-term business career path, although even at IBM I worked in their education department. When I returned to Fordham to earn an M.B.A., I lived in a residence hall as a headmaster, and I watched the behavior of the students. I knew then that I wanted to study that behavior ... to understand why bright students leave college. That became my dissertation. I stayed on at Fordham when the president asked me to help raise money. I didn't know anything about fundraising, but he told me all I had to really do was go out and tell my Fordham stories. I joined the capital campaign team and learned the trade, and found I was good at it. Right after Eileen and I married, a



Jesuit I knew at Fordham — John J. Piderit, S.J. — asked me to be his executive assistant in his new role as president at Loyola University Chicago. It was a great experience for me. I created the Loyola Freshman Experience to integrate new students into the community. It was the best learning experience for me. When I moved on to fundraising at Fairfield University, I landed the largest single gift in the university's history: \$10 million from an anonymous donor. I realized I know how to raise money. The non-profits I worked at were also education organizations: Junior Achievement works with volunteers to educate students in K-12 about business and entrepreneurship; the Joe Torre Foundation educates young people about the signs of domestic violence and where to go for help.

I didn't plan a path to lead me here. But, I am convinced that every step of the way there was a reason I did

what I did at those times ... and that is why I feel so prepared to do this. There is a sense of calling to do this: a call to service and to serve students. Higher education is able to change lives in unbelievable ways.

**MW:** *What about Marian University attracted you?*

**SD:** When I accepted the invitation to come and talk, the people around the table sold us. The sisters are wonderful; the board is committed.

Marian is a Catholic university in the Agnesian tradition. The sisters believed they could bring faith-based education and values to this community. The school

embraces all faiths and draws students from outside of the footprint. I believe a Catholic university is not just about being Catholic. It's about values and the values proposition it brings to the students and community. I had witnessed this in New York, where a large percent of students in the Catholic schools are Jewish; they are in those schools for the values, structure and outcomes.

Marian is not that different from what we experienced in our own education. We are from middle class families, and our parents believed Catholic education was the pathway to a better life. We both attended Catholic grade schools, high schools and colleges, including our advanced degrees. Eileen's mom worked two jobs to pay for Catholic school. My mother jokes: 'You know, your career would be nowhere without the nuns.' And not to put too much pressure on me, but I know of another graduate like me from St. Francis Prep High School in New York and of Fordham University in the Bronx who also came to Wisconsin: Vince Lombardi.



As Dr. McGowan had told me, Marian is a small Catholic institution that, with the right attention and leadership, can increase its impact. I am attracted to the economic challenges and the opportunity to build something on an established base. When I was asked to describe myself during our interview conversations, I said that I am like an architect: I like to build things that last. I built a student residence program at Fordham that is still going strong. The Loyola Freshman Experience has been replicated at other institutions. The Torre Foundation started with a

half-million dollar operating budget and I grew it to a \$5-and-a-half million operation with a broader reach into more schools and new areas.

Marian has so much to build on. The move-in day tradition where upperclassmen help new students unpack and organize and IT staff are in student rooms to set up computers is a wonderful way to welcome new residents to Marian. The pinning ceremony for all new students and their families lets them know they are now part of the Marian community and our job is to support

them: the students are called by name, presented with a Marian pin that has been blessed, they cross the stage and shake my hand and walk through the symbolic arch of knowledge. This tradition illustrates the great circle of life — in four years they will walk across that stage again and receive their diploma.

Our focus going forward is on quality ... of our programs, the students we attract, and our infrastructure. Our job is to help our students — wherever their starting point — reach their highest potential.

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## CONNECTING THE MARIAN CATHOLIC NETWORK

*While Steven DiSalvo was in conversation with Marian University leaders about the president position, he found it necessary to reschedule a follow-up meeting.*

*"I explained to board chair John Korb that I was due at a holiday gathering at the home of the new Archbishop of New York on that date," DiSalvo recalled.*

*When DiSalvo arrived at the holiday event, Archbishop Timothy Dolan greeted him somewhat ominously: "Steve DiSalvo, I have to talk to you. Go into the other room."*

*The conversation continued with a positive but surprising twist: "I know you are talking to Marian University. You will never meet nicer people. Please go there in January and speak with an open mind and spirit."*

*When asked how he could possibly know about DiSalvo's private professional business, the Archbishop replied that, as the former leader of the Milwaukee Archdiocese, he had friends on the Marian board who knew DiSalvo would be meeting with him that evening.*

*"When Marian asked me to accept the president position, I emailed Archbishop Dolan to tell him that I was accepting the position and to thank him for his prayers and support," DiSalvo said. "He responded that he was happy for our family, etc., and that the Marian board now owed him three pies from Fond du Lac's famous Schreiner's Restaurant."*

*DiSalvo has been assured that the tasty wager was paid.*