

# Achievers

JOURNEYS TO SUCCESS



## The Front Line: Bringing Vancouver College Back From The Brink

\$5.95

# Vancouver College: Back from the Brink

Threatened with extinction, this venerable institution emerged from a time of testing with a strong, confident plan for the future. There's a reason they call the Vancouver College teams the Fighting Irish.

**The  
Front  
Line**



Principal David Hardy, President Brother Anthony Murphy, Chairman John Nixon and Executive Director Bruce Jagger. They came to play.



At the beginning, there was a team of four: Charles Stafford, James McCormack, Mrs. McNeely (her first name, unfortunately, lost to history) and Father Francis O'Boyle. They pressed for a Catholic school for boys, raised donations from the community to build the school, persuaded the Archdiocese of Vancouver to ask the Congregation of Christian Brothers to direct it, and established a trust to protect the school's future. In 1922, four brothers—Lannon, Reid, Murtagh and Keane—arrived from Ireland to open Vancouver College.

Eighty-two years later, there is another team of four. Their names: Nixon, Murphy, Hardy and Jagger. These four (a public affairs consultant, a Christian Brother, an educator and a former international banker)—are in the front line of those determined to preserve and build upon the ideals and values on which Vancouver College was founded.

Of course, each group of four would tell you they are or were only team players, backed by many others. Vancouver College would not have been created without the urging and support of the Archdiocese of Vancouver and the Christian Brothers, and it would not continue today without the work and support of alumni, parents, teachers, and the community at large, Catholic and non-Catholic.

Nevertheless, the men with primary responsibility for carrying Vancouver College forward, back from the brink, are John Nixon, Brother Anthony Murphy, David Hardy and Bruce Jagger.

John Nixon, chairman of the Vancouver College board of directors, remembers his first day at the school: "My mother walked me in the door to start grade one in September 1957. My two brothers, David and Tim, followed me. And when my wife, Suzanne, and I were blessed with four sons, it never occurred to me that they would go anywhere else."

Nixon is one of the most effective and highly regarded public affairs consultants in the province, dealing with

issues management, labor disputes, media relations and government liaison. As Vancouver College entered its time of greatest testing in 82 years, he was a sound selection to not merely lead the defence, but to imagine creative ways to approach the future.

The near fatal problem facing Vancouver College in 1997: legal decisions holding Christian Brothers elsewhere in Canada liable for sexual abuse. To respond to the claims of victims and to deal with mounting legal fees, the Congregation motivated by a sense of justice, felt obligated to liquidate its assets. Among the properties considered assets by liquidator Arthur Anderson was Vancouver College.

Vancouver College itself had never been smeared with charges of abuse and had no liability, but because its campus was seen to hold enormous market value, the liquidator insisted that it be sold. The property, a eight-acre crest of land in south Shaughnessy, had grown immensely marketable—although when the school moved there in 1924 from its base, in St. Mary's Hall on Richards Street, the location was, said centenarian Brother Edward English (RIP) "out in the sticks."

The Nixon defence team held a trump card: they argued that the Christian Brothers did not own Vancouver College, but merely acted as trustees. The financial base and trust established by Stafford, McCormack, O'Boyle and Mrs. McNeely was the school's protection. "That's why," says Nixon, "they're our heroes."

Reinforcing Vancouver College's position was British Columbia law that says the assets of charitable trusts are never assets of the trustees. But, to Nixon's astonishment, the Ontario Court of Appeal disagreed, saying trust assets could be liquidated for claims that arose outside the trust. "The worst moment," says Nixon, "came when the Supreme Court of Canada refused our appeal to reconsider—can I say this?—the goofy decision of the Ontario Court of Appeal. It shattered my faith in the justice system, when the highest court in the land wasn't prepared even to hear our case."

Then BC Attorney General Geoff Plant stepped in and filed a petition to seek a court declaration that the Ontario decision had no validity in British Columbia, where the assets of charitable trusts are protected by law.

"At the end, in the face of two to three more years of litigation," says Nixon, "we decided to settle the matter. We were able to call on an expert like Peter Bull, who understands real estate values, to pull the settlement offer together and negotiate it with great skill. The settlement was reached literally on the Courthouse steps, July 25, 2002."

Archbishop Adam Exner, the recently retired leader of the Archdiocese, speaking of Nixon, said "There were times when reasons for hope were quite slim, and he did a wonderful job of keeping up morale, not only at the schools, but in the entire Catholic community."







A montage of eighty years at Vancouver College, including a portrait of the Rev. Brother Lannon, centre right, the school's first principal, and at bottom left, Brother Anthony Murphy with Pope John Paul II.

## “Our role,” says president Brother Anthony Murphy, “is carrying the unique values and character of Vancouver College into the future.”

The out-of-court settlement was not insignificant: \$13.8 million. Legal fees and other obligations raised the school's debt to \$16.3 million. And, the school not only had to pay this, it also had to carry out long postponed maintenance and build new facilities to meet the learning needs of new generations of students. The vehicle to achieve this: the Vancouver College Millennium Foundation. Enter Bruce Jagger.

Bruce Jagger didn't attend Vancouver College, but as a youngster, he “lived around the corner, hung out here, used the gymnasium.” He went on to a three-decade career in corporate banking, serving with the Royal Bank in major Canadian cities and Hong Kong.

After leaving the banking world, but not really ready to retire, he moved enthusiastically into the office of executive director of the Vancouver College Millennium Foundation, with responsibility for the school's ambitious capital campaign. To execute the campaign, he hired Community Counselling Service Co., LLC, an international fund raising company headquartered in New York, with offices throughout the US, Canada, Great Britain and Ireland. Now sitting in the office next to Jagger is Iowan Ed Clark. Clark's theme for the campaign is “The Strength of Tradition, The Pursuit of Excellence,” and under his forceful direction, the campaign already has raised more than \$6 million.

Some of that money has come as pledges from alumni and parents. Some has come from non-Catholic persons and organizations that recognize the unique contribution Vancouver College makes to the community and the ways in which it has, over eight decades, helped to shape the city. The international Congregation of Christian Brothers has given \$1.8

million, and the school's staff members, including Christian Brothers on the faculty, have pledged more than \$170,000. A significant amount—almost \$2.2 million—has come from the Archdiocese of Vancouver. Archbishop Exner was and is a vigorous and articulate supporter of Vancouver College, and the newly appointed Archbishop Raymond Roussin said, “I am deeply interested in the future of Vancouver College. You have my full support.”

Looking beyond paying the debt, Vancouver College has far-reaching plans for academic and facility improvements. Included are upgraded science laboratories, an advanced communications system, classroom modernization, repairs and enhancements to existing structures, and—most ambitious—a \$4.5 million multipurpose centre, a building bringing together sports, performing and visual arts, and sciences, with a flexible gymnasium, a two-storey stage, a library, seminar and meeting rooms, an atrium with space for art displays, and a “super science” laboratory.

John Nixon drew the school to its new president/principal model. “There was too much for one person,” says Nixon. “We wanted a president to deal with financial administration, fund raising, personnel, and external relations, and we wanted a principal focused singly on running the school.” And, he says, “We came up with two top-quality guys—Brother Anthony Murphy as president, David Hardy as principal and chief education officer.”

Brother Murphy, who describes himself as “the keeper of the flame,” was born in St. John's, Newfoundland, and joined the Christian Brothers in 1970. He has held senior positions at five schools in central and Atlantic Canada, and sees his role—as “carrying the unique values





The Vancouver College music program, directed by alumnus Larry Olson, is part of the school's continuing dedication to the arts.



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and character of Vancouver College into the future.” A dapper, sophisticated, gracious man, Murphy is quick to offer guests coffee or water (“sparkling or still?”) and, when he can get away from his duties, which is seldom, he most enjoys fly-fishing—“rainbow trout here, speckled trout back east.”

Dave Hardy, first lay educator to be

appointed principal, had spent forty-four years in Saskatoon, the first twelve as a student at St. Paul’s School, the next thirty-two as a teacher, vice-principal, principal, and, finally, superintendent of the city’s Catholic School Board. He was drawn to Vancouver College after a nation-wide search led by former Vancouver Police Chief Bob Stewart, a

member of the school’s board of directors. His last day at work in Saskatoon was July 4, 2003. His first day as principal of Vancouver College was July 7. Driving west that weekend, he says, “I looked forward to it eagerly—it was my heritage.”

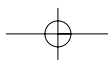
Hardy directs a faculty of forty-nine, with support staff raising that to more than sixty. He is in charge of the education of 950 boys, from kindergarten to grade twelve. “And after six months,” says Ed Clark, “he knew every boy by name.”

“The boys,” says Hardy, “are a delight,” while acknowledging that it is “a far more cosmopolitan environment than Saskatoon.”

His first priority was to “come to know the learning needs of the community.” And so, the school launched a survey of more than 800 families, alumni and staff, to form a strategic plan for the next five years.

As part of the fabric of what Brother Murphy points to as “the essential elements of Catholic education,” is considerable innovation in the classrooms. Grade five teacher Brother Ed Conti, for example, organized a “Van Gogh Night,” attended by some twenty-five students and fifty parents. “Students,” says Hardy, “got to display their skills in both fine arts and public speaking.” How many grade five students know about Vincent Van Gogh? “He also,” laughs Hardy, “got them to memorize ‘The Cremation of Sam McGee.’”

Each year, the Fraser Institute rates high schools throughout British Columbia, basing its assessments on provincial government examinations. The 2003 report ranks Vancouver College twelfth, and in the top 4.3 percent of the province’s 279 high schools. The school always places among the top twenty, and Hardy is pleased, although, he says, “that’s not an altar we worship at. Academic excellence is only one measure of success.” Brother Murphy agrees: “We have high academic standards,” he says, “but we support the development of the whole person.”



Brother Murphy talks about the school's role and responsibility in education:

"Vancouver College tries to be accessible to the broadest socio-economic cross-section. No boy is ever turned away because his family can't afford the tuition. Eleven percent of our students are on some bursary.

"Some schools," he continues, "would narrow the gate, accept only the best and the brightest. We resisted that. It's easy to celebrate high achievers, and we do. But there are unsung heroes, those who make improvements, who raise the bar. We define excellence in education as each student doing the best he can.

"We have a wonderful group of young men. We had 140 graduates last year, a 100 percent graduation rate. One hundred students graduated with honors, the highest academic achievement in years." Up to eighty percent continue to post-secondary education, but more important, says Murphy, are "the values of a Catholic education—we are a faith-based community." And this is of immeasurable value, also for the fifteen percent of students who do not come from the Catholic faith tradition.

Bruce Jagger, although not an alumnus of Vancouver College, has a "strong affection" for the school. It is, he says, "my neighborhood. Something special happens here. I've seen it in my own four boys."

Jagger's connection to the school reaches back three generations. His father-in-law was Harry P. O'Hagan, who played on the first Vancouver College football team, and later became president of Seaboard Lumber. Harry was the younger brother of James P. O'Hagan, a member of the school's first graduating class. An academic award is named for Harry; O'Hagan Field is named for Jimmy. Jagger's mother-in-law is Carmelita O'Hagan, introduced to Harry by his classmate and her cousin, handsome Paul Cantwell, a member of the

school's 1930s tennis team. Now a petite, stylish, nonagenarian with brilliant blue eyes, Carmelita has watched eleven grandchildren go through Vancouver College. "They learned values," she says.

Another multi-generational group at Vancouver College is the Clarke family. "There weren't many years," says Jagger, "when there wasn't a Clarke at the school." The Clarke family's connection with the school began when Dick and Olive Clarke were members of St. Patrick's Players, a theatre group that traveled from parish to parish, and involved Vancouver College. Dick played leading roles, Olive did makeup, and one



Brother Ed Conti watches in amusement as one of his grade five students plays air guitar under a classroom display celebrating Elvis Presley.

of the supporting players was Jimmy O'Hagan.

The paterfamilias today is Emerald Award winner Alfred T. Clarke, a student (and boxing team member) during the years of World War Two. He remembers there were military drills and "we had to learn to take apart a machine gun."

Alf, after a long period thinking of joining the Redemptorist Fathers, enrolled in law school at UBC, and has acted as legal counsel to the Archdiocese of Vancouver since 1974, the beginning of

the Archbishop Carney years. His son, Tom, also a lawyer, served as chairman of the Vancouver College board, and is now a trustee. A modest man who puts aside discussion of his awards, he says, simply, "I thought it was a tremendous school." He notes "the difference it made in my life and the lives of my classmates." He credits then principal Brother Louis Bucher's challenge to students to use their abilities not simply to get good marks or a good job, but to help others. "He told us 'You have to try your best for a worthwhile purpose.'" Last year, Tom's son Michael graduated from Vancouver College, and his son David will enter grade eight in September. Tom talks about the value of attending Vancouver College, "getting things out of it you can draw upon."

Among the things graduates can draw on is the continuing camaraderie. There is a striking sense of brotherhood among alumni of vastly different backgrounds—Tom Clarke says "most of my closest friends date back to school days." What they also have found, says Bruce Jagger, are "opportunities for leadership."

And so, Vancouver College, back from the brink of extinction by the thump of a gavel, has, by perseverance and faith and, one must believe, divine will, moved through that fierce time of testing and proceeds

toward a new and stronger era. "We are fortunate," says John Nixon, "to be part of a resilient and generous community. We have the knowledge that the school is secure, and confidence that we can continue to build and grow."

Charles Stafford, James McCormack, Mrs. McNeeley and Father O'Boyle, from wherever they may be watching, must be pleased that their vision is in the hands of another strong team of four—and hundreds, perhaps thousands of others—who are committed to the continuance and progress of Vancouver College. ✦

