

PROFILE By Merla Zellerbach

Joseph R. Fink

In the summer of 1988, Dominican University of California in San Rafael welcomed its eighth president, Dr. Joseph R. Fink. He came to the college after 23 years experience in higher education, along with having earned a doctorate in American History from Rutgers, an A.B. degree from Rider University, and three honorary doctorates for his work in academia and the community.

During the Commonwealth Club's Centennial Year in 2003, Dr. Fink presided over the Club's Board of Governors, as well as served on the boards of numerous charitable, environmental and cultural organizations. (Despite a recent incorrect report in another publication, Dr. Fink is not intending to retire in the near future.)

We met in his office on the lovely Dominican campus, a complex of old and modern buildings in a bucolic setting of spacious lawns, brightly colored flowers and trees.

Impeccably dressed in a gray pin-striped suit, the popular president is a tall man with an impressive build and a warm handshake. He spoke in a quiet voice, underscoring his love and passion for the school.

Merla Zellerbach: Were you born on the East Coast?

Joe Fink: Yes, in northern New Jersey, and I never thought I'd live in California. I'd been president of two colleges, one private and one public, before I was invited out here. I came and saw the marvelous campus — thought I'd stay three or four years, then go home again. (laughs) Now I'm never going back!

Do you come from a large family?

No, I'm an indulged only child. My father was a corporate executive; my mother was a traditional homemaker.

Did you always know what you wanted to do?

Not really. When I graduated from high school I checked to see who got paid the most and it was chemical engineers, so I decided to be a chemical engineer. (laughs) But I was terrible at that, so I switched over to history and English. Eventually I got a PhD in American history and thought I would teach. And that got me into college administration.

Obviously a wise choice. Congratulations on celebrating 20 years at Dominican. What are some of the highlights of your career here?

If I had to pick just one, I'd say that over the last 20 years, Dominican has responded to the changing demographics of California. Our school used to have a homogeneous student population. Today it's very diverse.

We've raised money for scholarships and financial aid that gives many people, who might otherwise not be able to do so financially, the chance to attend a small college with small classes and individual attention. Otherwise they'd have to go to public institutions with large classes and they could get lost. The impact of that is that our graduation rates for minority populations are much higher than those of larger institutions like UC.

Since you came to Dominican, enrollment has tripled from 650 to more than 2,100. How do you explain this?

Well, the university was established in 1890 by the Dominican Sisters and they operated it for many years. They provided a firm foundation. But colleges operated by religious communities of women are different from colleges operated by religious communities of men.

The Jesuits at USF were playing golf and meeting people and raising money while the Dominican Sisters had other priorities.

There was a need to increase

our visibility and have more people know about us. So we brought in a different kind of staff, extended our fundraising efforts and reached out into the community... letting people see and understand the operation.

That's worked well. The University has an excellent reputation.

But we're nowhere near where we need to be in terms of visibility. Dominican's been separated from the religious community for about 40 years, so we're independent, we're really not a Catholic school anymore. But we have a Catholic and a Dominican heritage, and that's important for us.

Last August, you opened a \$20 million Science Center for study and research. Is that mainly for grad students?

No, it's for graduates and undergraduates. The new Science Center, at 35,000 square feet, is the largest building on campus, and truly state of the art. We've become involved with the Buck Institute for Age Research in Novato. They have topflight researchers on aging, but the researchers can't teach there, so they can come here and teach. And our students can go

there and do research.

Imagine if you were 19 or 20 and a sophomore or junior here. You work with a professor, and a reputable journal publishes your research with your name and your professor's name on it. Imagine how that builds confidence!

Has this ever happened?

Yes. But my favorite story is about a young guy named Rocky Chavez. He was from Stockton or Fresno, and wound up coming to us. His mother and father never graduated from high school. His older brother and sister never went to college.

He's not sure what he's going to do, gets mentored by our faculty, and when he's a junior, he wins a national competition, gets a \$30,000 scholarship from the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation, finishes with us and goes on to medical school.

The best part of the story is that when I was East recently, I met the guy who runs that Foundation. He said, "I just had one of your kids, Rocky Chavez, speak to my board meeting. He told us that after he was so successful, his brother and sister went to college, and his mother and father went back and got their high school diplomas."

What someone like Rocky did has a ripple effect on his family and the community (smiles). I know I sound like I'm preaching.

What's the most important fact our readers should know about Dominican?

Let me start in a general sense. When I came to California, I was amazed that when people talk about higher education here, they talk about the state's higher education systems. They seldom talk about the independent colleges. So if anything should come out, it should be about the contributions of independent schools.

We're an institution that has a small student-faculty ratio. We try to find the strengths of every student and give him or her a strong liberal arts core.

So Dominican isn't only for the wealthy?

Absolutely not! Most people think that private education is elitist and too expensive. They don't realize that 80 percent of our students get financial aid from us, let alone what they get from the federal and state government.

A while back, I was sent to see Willie Brown in Sacramento, when he was Speaker, to lobby for some legislation. He kept talking about elitism, and we had a massive argument. We met later on, and we're friends now, but I still don't think he's convinced. There's this mindset. I don't know what the facts are today, but about five years ago, the median income of UC students was greater than that of Stanford students. People just don't understand that.

We do tend to think of small private schools as expensive, especially today. But let's go on — any fond memories from your years at the Commonwealth Club?

Well, in 1990, I was the quarterly chairman of the Club when George Bush, Sr. came to town, and I had to introduce him. So there we are at lunch, with the President on one side of me and George Deukmejian on the other. I ignored the Governor completely because I wanted to talk to the President. And I'd been carefully instructed to observe the protocol: "When you introduce the President, just say, 'The President of the United States. No biographical data!'"

But I got up there, in front of 2,000 people, and I couldn't resist calling him the Education President and praising him, because I really liked him. Then he got up and said nice things about me, so it was okay.

A few years ago, I was asked to introduce his son. When I mentioned I'd done the same thing with his father, George W. said, "Working your way down the food chain, are you?" (laughs)

Anything else you'd like to add?

Only that coming to California was the best personal and professional thing that ever happened to me. The Bay Area is such a wonderful place to live, work and raise children, and I'm on one of the prettiest campuses that you can find. When I look around at the beauty that surrounds me, I know I'm a very fortunate person. It's been a truly great ride.



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