THE TWO RIVER TIMES™

SCENE

THE WEEK OF NOVEMBER 28 - DECEMBER 5, 2014

JOSEPH A. PACELLI:
HEAD OF THE CLASS

JOSEPH PACELLI has a love of education that is hard to match.

When the founder of Oak Hill Academy in Lincroft talks about teaching, it is with a combination of pride, reverence and delight with a bit of awe in the mix. He recalls former students with great fondness and views the possibilities the future may bring with excitement.

Pacelli, who took a leap of faith when he started the school in 1980 with four classrooms rented from the Lincroft Unitarian Society, is still headmaster at age 74. He teaches an advanced math course each year, is at his desk at 6 a.m. each day, leaves for home at about 5 p.m. and has absolutely no plans to retire.

"I love to learn," he said, mentioning a new calculator he is looking into to see if should be introduced as a new tool for Oak Hill students.

That love of learning has its roots in Leonardo where Pacelli grew up and attended Leonardo Elementary and Middletown High schools. When he left home for college for Washington and Jefferson College in western Pennsylvania, it was only the second time he had left New Jersey. "The first time was on my high school senior class to Washington, D.C," he said.

During college, Pacelli, who was a math major with a physics minor, studied hard, played football and worked a variety of campus jobs, including in the cafeteria – for $1 an hour and free meals – and the library checking out books.

He got his love of reading from his mother, whom he described as someone "who worked her entire life." She was employed for many years at Eisner's uniform factory in Red Bank and took the bus there every day. From his father, who died when Pacelli was just a junior in high school, he learned the value of hard work and keeping calm in difficult situations.

"I looked up to both of my parents," he said. "Parents should be role models for kids, never mind the entertainers and sports figures… Mom and Dad were both role models for me."

His father "fibbed" about his age to get into the Navy during World War I. After the war, he started a trucking firm in Newark but eventually sold the business. He then went into the U.S. Coast Guard during World War II and was stationed at Sandy Hook. After the war, Pacelli's father got his ships pilot's license and piloted ships in and out of New York Harbor. He then began working as captain of fishing boats out of Atlantic Highlands and bought his own fishing boat, the Sea Pigeon.

At age 14 or 15, Pacelli "would collect the fee when people go on the boat. It was all day for $5." He would help people fillet their catch, clean up after the day's sail and do anything that needed to be done.

He got to watch his father up close learn from his example as he handled dangerous situations. "He always kept his head, did the right thing and didn't panic," Pacelli said.

Another lesson learned from his father was that "there's nothing wrong with working hard." It's a lesson he likes to impart to the students at Oak Hill Academy. "If you put a good day's work in … you feel you accomplished something, you feel rewarded," he said.

After his father died of heart problems, it was his mother who insisted that Pacelli go to college and become the first in the family to graduate from an institution of higher learning.

"My mother was an avid reader, self-educated," he said.

He learned to take care of his possessions, value what he had and do what needed to be done without fanfare through his mother's example.

"I wasn't pampered, I was cared for – there's a difference," he said. "She was loving in the way that she knew when to do what she had to do. One of the things I tell my parents here and people I come in contact with is that, while educating a child, don't do for a child what they can do for themselves."

Pacelli got out of college in 1963. Between finishing his last exam and graduation, he married his wife Jo Ann, whom he had met during a previous summer when he worked as a lifeguard at Ideal Beach in Middletown.

Pacelli, who was an Army ROTC cadet to help pay for his education, got a deferment so that he could go to grad school at Stevens Institute of Technology in Hoboken. As a student with some time available,

Pacelli went over to St. Peter's Prep to volunteer at the Jesuit high school. The principal offered him the freshman football coach's post – a paying job – and he took it readily. The day after accepting that job, the principal called and offered him a job teaching math.

"I worked at St. Peter's Prep for two years. It was an incredible learning experience," he said.

"It was wonderful," he said. His feeling about teaching hasn't changed.

After getting his master's at Stevens – and following the birth of his first two of four children – he began his service in the Army. He was stationed in the Office of Personnel Operations for the Signal branch from 1965-1967 at the Pentagon, during the height of the Vietnam War. "I was assigning first lieutenants, second lieutenants and captains worldwide," he said.

At the end of the two-year period, the Pacellis bought a house in the East Keansburg section of Middletown and Pacelli went back to St. Peter's Prep. But, he found that coaching, teaching and commuting was taking a toll on his family life. Eventually, he interviewed for a teaching job closer to home at Christian Brothers Academy, which was still a relatively new school.

It was during just his second year at CBA when the then-27-year-old Pacelli was named chairman of the math department. At the same time, he went back to school and eventually earned his supervisory and principal's certifications at Rutgers. During his fourth year at CBA, the school created a new post, assistant principal for curriculum, and Pacelli accepted that challenge. It was a post he held for nine years.

The impetus for the founding of Oak Hill Academy came about when CBA began holding special Saturday classes to boost the math, reading and writing skills of seventh- and eighth grade boys and girls in the community.

"The program was a huge success," he said. "My wheels started to turn … I thought there was a good opportunity here for the pre-high school program" that would include those skills, plus other subjects, like Latin. He consulted the heads at Ranney School and Rumson Country Day School and asked if they thought there was room for another school. They believed there was, Pacelli said.

He brought the idea of opening a junior high school to CBA officials, who did not think it was right for the school.

Pacelli couldn't shake the idea that he thought such a school would be successful and was needed in the area.

After discussing the concept with an attorney, who specialized in education during a dinner one night, the idea began to take hold. Pacelli and the attorney began working to bring the school to fruition. They gathered a group of advisors. Pacelli also went to Brookdale Community College to consult with people from SCORE – retired business people who helped those with small business opportunities – on the financial aspects of the idea.

Pacelli worked on founding the school for two years before opening Oak Hill Academy.

He left CBA in October 1980 and worked on recruiting students and teachers. He was able to secure space at the Unitarian Church on West Front Street in Lincroft, though the space had to be transformed each week back for use by the church on Sundays. The church also gave him use of an office gratis for many months before the first day of class.
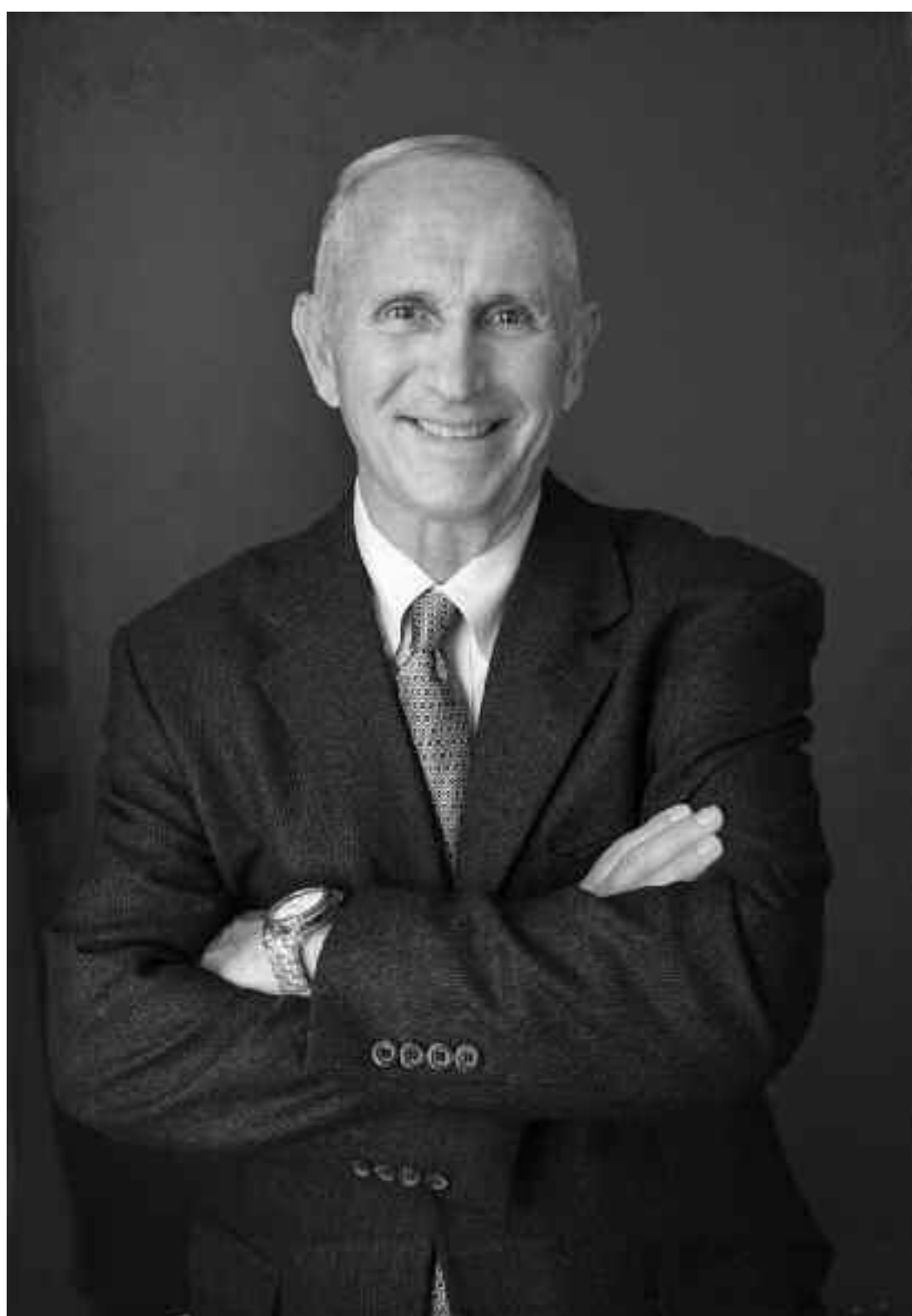
Pacelli called the school Oak Hill Academy because it was located in the Oak Hill section of Middletown.

The newly minted headmaster welcomed a first class of 25 eighth-graders and 25 seventh-graders in September 1981. In addition to a rigorous curriculum, the school boasted something that wasn't found elsewhere those days – computer science classes.

Pacelli, who took a send mortgage on his home to help get the school started, was the only full-time teacher at the start. He hired "top-notch" experienced teachers who worked part time, either for morning or afternoon sessions, and was able to get transportation for students by using the same bus routes established by area school districts.

"Things started to roll," he said. "The families that signed up for this came here on a wing and a prayer."

Oak Hill Academy was a success from the start, the founder said. "We went into academic competi-

tions and did well. We had our athletics. That first year we had cross-country, boys and girls basketball and tennis … things we could do with a limited number of kids." The first basketball uniforms, which were red and white, were purchased by Pacelli at the Englishtown Auction.

The school was able to grow each year "because of the demand."

For two years, the school consisted of seventh- and eighth-graders. The school added a sixth grade during the third year, which was about the same time that Oak Hill Academy was looking to buy it's first piece of property.

The school bought a former chicken farm on 5 acres on Middletown-Lincroft Road for $84,000 in 1983. The property consisted of three chicken coops and the house, which now serves as the administration offices. The school was also able to secure a second parcel of 5 acres for $18,000, swampy and landlocked, that was located behind the property.

The school purchased 10 side-by-side modular units in May 1983 and was able to open on its own property that September. The units were the first of a number modular structures purchased by Oak Hill Academy to form the multibuilding campus. In subsequent years the school bought a prefabricated building that was used temporarily by Prudential insurance. Another building had been a church, located in Westfield. Most of the school's furniture was bought from military surplus.

Property was also added, including a nearby home, which is now the headmaster's residence. The campus is now 20 acres.

During the early 2000s, with the help of some fundraising and a bank mortgage, the school added its arts building. The large Scire Student Activities

Center, which was built in Vermont, was added and so was a science and environment center.

The school continued to grow through the years and added more classes. By the end of the 1980s, the school was fourth though eighth grade. During the early 1990s, Oak Hill was able to add classes so that it became a kindergarten through eighth-grade school. Eventually, a pre-K was added.

When people asked if Oak Hill would be adding high school classes, Pacelli said, "That was easy, the answer was no … We were not going to become a high school. That was not who we were.

"We are a school that wants its kids – from Day One – to be ready for high school in so many ways when they leave us, ready academically, be organized, have their study skills in place and be independent."

The school today has 350 students.

It's clear that Pacelli loves what he's doing. Even after many years, he still gets excited about the prospect of teaching.

"I'm in good health. I love to teach. I still teach my advance algebra class. I still have ideas I want to share with the teachers," he said. "For the computer center, next year, (the students) are requesting – and we're going to work on it – a 3D printer."

Ask Pacelli what has meant the most to him over the years and he smiles. "That's easy, it's our graduates and our students here now.

"What brings me here every day? It's our teachers, their ideas … If there's something good, than we should be using it," he said.

He sees the success of the school as having come from hard work "and a lot of luck with the right people."

BY MICHELE J. KUHN

DANNY SANCHEZ