

Optimism *and the* positive power *of* listening

KEVIN SMITH LEADS NEW VILLA MARIA CATHEDRAL PREPARATORY CATHOLIC SCHOOL SYSTEM INTO NEW ERA

BY MARY
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PHOTOS BY
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Kevin Smith was hiking in the mountains of Colorado with his wife, Maria, and their two young children, TJ and Maggie, when he experienced “a feeling deep in my gut” that he was ready for a big change.

That was in July 2021, when he was in his sixth year as CEO of the preK-8 Monte Cassino School in Tulsa, Oklahoma, a Catholic school founded by the Benedictine Sisters.

Not long afterward, he read about a job opening for president of a Catholic education system in the Diocese of Erie. It would comprise a K-8 school in Erie’s inner-city and a newly consolidated co-ed secondary school.

For Smith, a Cleveland-area native, moving to Erie would be ideal because it would bring him closer to his family. But there was something bigger that tugged at him. Like the Benedictines, he quieted himself to listen and accept where God was leading him.

“I had a strong sense of call,” Smith, 59, says. “As soon as I read the job description, I said, ‘That’s where I want to be.’”

A year later, in July 2022, Smith took the reins of the newly named Villa Maria Cathedral Preparatory Catholic School System. His first order of business has been to listen, much as he did on that mountain hike in Colorado.

Listening will be a crucial skill given the challenging, sometimes controversial, path that led to the consolidation of the

130-year-old all-girls’ school, Villa Maria Academy, and the 100-year-old all-boys’ school, Cathedral Prep. Both are now located at the original Prep campus on W. 9th Street near St. Peter Cathedral in downtown Erie. The new \$12.5 million, three-story Salata Technology & Innovation Center is its centerpiece.

The finer, but significant, points of that melding were recent decisions to add Villa Maria to the official corporate name and to include Villa’s blue school color with Prep’s black and orange. Both of these additions were made after many alumni and friends of Villa voiced their concerns about retaining Villa traditions. School officials had always planned to include Villa’s longtime customs of a ring ceremony, Sports Day and Mary’s Day as part of Prep’s regular school functions.

“If I do my job well, then every faculty member, every student and all alumni will feel empowered and listen to the call of God,” Smith says, aware of the sensitivities that come with school consolidations. He had been involved with a couple of mergers during his education career.

Smith will oversee the operation of the secondary school, now called Cathedral Prep, and the K-8 Mother Teresa Academy, a couple of blocks away on Sassafra Street. He intends to bring to his new position a lifelong Catholic perspective nurtured by various religious orders: the Marinists, the Jesuits and the Benedictines.

A graduate of Lake Catholic High School in Mentor, Ohio, he earned his bachelor’s degree from the University of Dayton

in 1985, and a master’s of education in exercise sciences from Bowling Green State University. For the first nine years of his career, he taught biology, then spent the past 28 years in school administration.

“You can have somebody who checks all the experience boxes, but they may not have the calm demeanor or the passion that Kevin has,” says David Slomski, a Cathedral Prep graduate who served as interim president for 15 months before Smith’s first day on the job July 1. “I’m anxious to see what the next three to five years will bring under his leadership.”

So is everyone else.

All eyes are on Smith, a self-described optimist who will help Cathedral Prep become what some say will be one of the most innovative Catholic education systems in the country. Smith, himself, says it will be a “guide star institution for Catholic schools in the United States.”

With a total enrollment of 700, Cathedral Prep is the fourth largest high school in Erie County in terms of student population, and the fifth largest in northwest Pennsylvania, public and private, according to Will Pituch, vice president and school principal. The new Salata Center will provide unparalleled opportunities in the sciences, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM).

“As an educator, I believe that what we’ll be doing at Cathedral Prep won’t be matched anywhere within a hundred miles of Erie,” Pituch says.

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Kevin Smith took over as the new president of the Villa Maria Cathedral Preparatory Catholic School System this summer.

INTRODUCING *a* TRANSFORMED CATHOLIC SCHOOL SYSTEM

THE CONSOLIDATION of Villa Maria Academy and Cathedral Preparatory School blends 230 years of Catholic traditions onto one secondary school campus in downtown Erie.

CORPORATE NAME:

Villa Maria Cathedral Preparatory Catholic School System, which also includes the K-8 Mother Teresa Academy

SECONDARY SCHOOL NAME:

Cathedral Preparatory School

PREP'S NEW MASCOT:

Ram. It features the new school colors of blue, black and orange.

Here are some significant aspects of the \$12.5 million building and renovation project recently completed at the downtown Erie campus:

SALATA TECHNOLOGY & INNOVATION CENTER

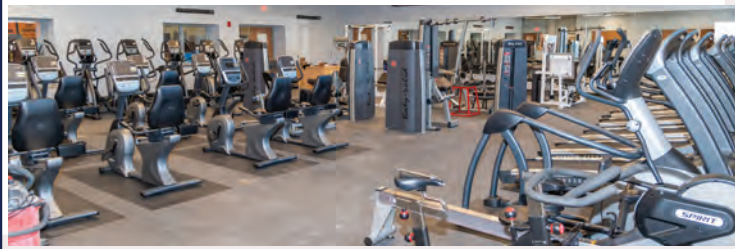
A three-story, 35,000-square-foot addition to the W. 10th Street side of the school

- First floor includes administrative offices, cafeteria and coffee nook with gathering space.
- Second floor features guidance offices and balcony seating for the cafeteria.
- Third floor features an 1,800-square-foot outdoor balcony for learning and events, engineering and fabrication classrooms, labs and workshops, an eSports lab, including 40 gaming PCs, and a communications/studio classroom.

CHANGES TO EXISTING BUILDING:

- Dance studio/fitness center (replaces pool)
- All new music/choir spaces
- Fully renovated and expanded visual arts space
- Former library converted into work area for teachers

*Several generous donors, including Jean Salata, Prep Class of 1984, gave to the capital campaign.



Staff members got to know Kevin Smith this summer as he began leading the newly consolidated schools of Villa Maria Academy and Cathedral Prep. Pictured, from left, are: Smith; Dawn Campbell, Spirit Store manager; Chris Bleggi, director of strategic communications; Christine Eddy, vice president of development and external relations; Jimmy Smith, assistant vice president of development and strategic initiatives; and Sonya Whitman, vice president of strategic marketing and communications.

Smith is eager to see it all come together, particularly for future generations of students, including his own children who are now attending Our Lady of Peace School in Erie. They'll benefit from classes at the Salata Center, the school's Academic Pathways Program, and Prep's community partnerships with such entities as Gannon University, Erie Insurance, VNET, LECOM, Marquette Savings and others.

"The STEM center isn't just a feature of the school, it will fundamentally change how we deliver education," Smith says. "The world that young people will walk into requires that we provide world-class opportunities."

He knows, however, that his goals can only be achieved by sharing a common vision with alumni, students, families, faculty and the larger community. That vision, he says, can be fostered by the unique gifts of the Sisters of St. Joseph, who founded Villa Maria Academy in 1892. That's why he asked members of the religious community to speak to school administrators before the academic year started in September.

Sister Mary Drexler, SSJ, a former Villa principal and current member of the community's leadership team, is grateful for Smith's invitation.

"The sisters' goal is to unite people with people and people with God through the works we do," Sister Mary says. "I want to see that embedded in what happens at the new school and how students treat one another and how they reach out to their neighbors in need."

Those who have come to know Smith believe he will do his best to instill that sensibility in the everyday life of students at Cathedral Prep.

Sara Kallner, a Villa grad and current board chair for the school system, calls Smith an "impressive individual."

"Kevin is a planner, he's methodical in his decision-making, and he has a unique blend of confidence without arrogance. I think he will serve as a fabulous role model for our young women and men," she says.

Students have put their faith in Smith, too. Many met him during the interview process last year and in gatherings with student leaders and athletes this summer. They point to his youthful energy (he's a skier, a mountain biker and trail runner who used to do competitive triathlons), and his openness (he does regular spiritual direction, starts every day with gratitude, and is an avid reader).

"He's not too old and he's not too young," says William McBrier, a Prep senior and student council president. "I think he can hang with the modern aspect of schooling. It's going to be a new campus and a new institution. I think he's the right guy."

Lindsay Armanini, a junior and student council secretary, attended Villa the past

two years. She admits to feeling sad at the end of an era, but she remains ever hopeful.

"Villa will always be in my heart," Armanini says, "but I'm excited to see our faith traditions carry over to the new school and create new relationships with our brothers at Prep."

She describes the new school president as "personable and kind," adding, "I think he really listens to [students]."

Listening is what brought Smith to Prep, and it's likely what will help sustain the school system moving forward. ✚



Lyndsay Armanini and Will McBrier now attend school on the same campus this year, as the consolidation of Villa Maria Academy and Cathedral Prep finally became a reality this fall. They're pictured with the school's new mascot, a ram, in the Joann Mullen Gymnasium at the Hagerty Events Center in Erie.