

Interview with Fr. Boller

By Ray Aumack, '55

Prep President, Fr. Ken Boller. SJ



On Friday Morning, September 20th, I had the privilege of interviewing Prep's new President, Fr. Ken Boller, SJ.

Ken was very gracious with his greeting. His eyes sparkle with enthusiasm. He joined me at the chairs in front of his desk, tucked one leg under him, and made his office a cocoon of affability.

We had met the previous evening at the President's Dinner. At the dinner, Jim Horan gave us a lot of data and I wanted to confirm what I was hearing. Prep now has 940 students, the largest student body since the 1960s. There are 240 in the freshman class, 27 more there were in our graduating class. The difference is that we started out with more than 270 when we entered Prep. Almost all of these 240 students will graduate. The level of academic standards at Prep is quite high and the students that qualify are very bright.

Financially, Prep is doing great. The annual fund in the past fiscal year amounted to \$1.6 million with another \$600 thousand in restricted funds, for a total of \$2.5 million donated from alumni, parents, and friends. Special events were spectacular. The Hall of Fame dinner yielded \$39 thousand; the golf tournament \$146 thousand, \$35 thousand more than

last year. The gala generated \$466 thousand, all of which goes to student aid; and the fashion show, \$124 thousand.

Gifts for capital projects and scholarship funds totaled \$3.8 million. The total for all fundraising amounts to almost \$6.9 million, a tremendous tribute to the alumni, parents, and friends of Prep. Prep grants student aid to 61% of our students.

It was very clear only a couple of decades ago that a private school could not survive without a foundation. Prep's endowment at this time is approximately \$20 million.

The school is now a campus with several buildings separated by Warren Street. The Keenan Athletic Field is about four blocks west on Grand Street. All the new construction and upgrades was paid for before construction began. This was the mandate of the 2009 strategic plan.

With all of that going for him, I asked Fr. Ken if there was anything left to achieve.

He talked about building projects at the football field. They are also still exploring various possibilities with the St. Peter's Grammar School building.

Academically, they will be leaving the Middle States Evaluation Program. Middle States is focusing on evaluations through a statistical model related to exam results. Fr. Ken feels that Middle States can no longer serve them well because Prep educates the whole person and a proper evaluation of Prep just does not fall into a statistical model. They are joining the Independent Schools Association. They will still go through the same type of demanding evaluations but the outcome will be more appropriate for grading the work of St. Peter's Prep. They also go through a most demanding preparation and evaluation exercise for the Jesuit schools and that will be done in March of next year. Be assured that Prep's extraordinarily high academic standards will continue.

With everything that has to be done, he wants to keep Prep affordable. Tuition is now at \$13,500, still among the lowest of the Catholic schools of New Jersey.

Since Fr. Ken served as President of Fordham Prep and Xavier, and though comparisons are often odious, I asked him how Prep compares with the other urban Jesuit schools. He told me that the three are more remarkably the same than we are different. The three have strong academic programs, good athletic programs, and excellent Christian service and formation programs. He pointed out that the culture of each school reflects the culture of the communities from which they draw students. Fordham has some Bronx brash; Xavier has some New York

sophistication. St. Peter's has all the swagger of a Hudson County school but that may be changing. The demographics of Hudson County communities being principle feeders for Prep are starting to erode. McNair High School and Hudson County Tech are both outstanding schools, as is the prep school component of Bayonne High School. We already have a lot of students coming in from the suburbs and that may be increasing. This may be something to watch for the future.

I asked him, "What does a President do all day?" Laughing, he told me about his individual meeting with every member of the faculty and staff. Each one gets a half hour for a no holds barred conversation. There are over a hundred employees and he has just passed the halfway point. He likes to manage by walking around, talking to faculty, staff and students, letting them get to know him while he gets to know them. There are all the celebrations at which he must preside. As President, he has to meet current and potential donors. I invited him to join us for lunch on October 4th and he accepted. That also adds to his responsibilities. He had just met with the Class of '56 at Sea Girt.

During the interview, we had a lock down exercise, a practice for the possibility of tragedies that we hope will never come.

In my volunteer role at Prep, I have worked for now six presidents. Each one has their own charisma and each was an outstanding Jesuit and totally dedicated in their service to Prep. I was overwhelmed with Fr. Ken's personal charm, his obvious intelligence, his spirituality, his easy manner, and his dynamic vision. He asked me if I read Pope Francis' interview and fortunately, I had. Fr. Ken is cut from the same cloth, a Ignatian Jesuit through and through. Prep is in for a great future.
