

Beyond Words

Father Steven Hurd, director of the Bellarmine Jesuit Retreat House

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IMAGES BY SUSAN MCCONNELL PHOTOGRAPHY**

*During the holidays, many of us will host events and welcome guests into our homes, taking time to set the stage for another wonderful season. At the **Bellarmino Jesuit Retreat House** in Barrington Hills, the spirit of generosity and gratitude has no season. Guests are invited year round to renew and reflect.*

The gifts are for one's self.

Clara Kholamian was curious one day. Instead of passing by the two stone columns on County Line Road marking the Barrington Hills entrance of the Jesuit Retreat House, she steered her Chevy Suburban onto the half-mile of winding blacktop. At the end she found a pale brick building nestled among large oak trees. “I didn’t want to be a distraction or disturb anything. I just wondered if it was closed or what it was,” she says.

Fifty-one-year-old Steven Hurd, the newly appointed director of the Bellarmine Jesuit Retreat House, says that happens frequently. He is a Jesuit priest who likes wearing casual clothes and working on computers. A multi-tasking guy, his job description runs the gamut between administrator, spiritual leader, and sometimes-groundskeeper. Besides the drive-throughs, he occasionally sees people walking their dogs or riding horses on the trails that wind through the property. That’s okay with him, as long as visitors are respectful and don’t disturb the people who have traveled here for a retreat.

Last year approximately 5,000 people visited Bellarmine, for reasons as individual as each of them. Many are recruited from Catholic institutions including parishes, high schools, and universities. They may be seen walking through the gardens, relaxing on benches, or positioning themselves in front of the Stations of the Cross that hang on a row of mature trees. Oftentimes they are not heard, because Bellarmine specializes in offering silent retreats.

Bellarmino is one out of a network of 20 Jesuit retreat houses throughout the United States. What is referred to as the “old mansion” on the property was built as a private residence on 360 acres in the 1920s by a railroad tycoon and early member of the Barrington Hills Country Club named Frank A. Hecht. Its original entrance lay where the Quaker Oats building is now.

The Jesuits are a branch of the Roman Catholic Church founded by St. Ignatius in the mid-16th century. Often recognized for their role as teachers, their mission is to promote a lifetime of intellectual and spiritual growth based on the spiritual exercises of St. Ignatius. They purchased the property in 1948 to serve as a retreat house and currently retain 80 acres of the land, 30 of it cleared and 50 wooded.

Managing it all is Father Hurd and two other “young” priests who are in their fifties, Father Mark Andrews and Father Robert Flack. They are assisted by a small staff of office, kitchen, cleaning, and maintenance workers.

Everyone is welcome

This is not a members-only retreat house. Jesuit and non-Jesuits collaborate in planning retreats and programs. As part of their civic fellowship, the facilities are open at times to other religions and civic groups. In 2003 the main building was expanded to include a 2,500-square-foot conference room and five additional meeting rooms. Programs provided throughout the year include single-day events, 12-step programs, teen and young adult guided retreats, as well as individual and directed retreats. Participants do not necessarily need to be Catholic or even come with a group.

Real estate broker Frank Caiazza came to his first three-day silent retreat here in 1980 and has never missed a year since. He likes the quiet. “At a retreat, you learn to listen,” he says. “You hear what you can’t hear when you are always talking.” He believes so much in the benefit of a retreat that he spreads the word as a team captain at St. Anne Catholic Church in Barrington.



The “old mansion” at Bellarmine on County Line Road. The home was the original country estate of railroad tycoon Frank A. Hecht.

His is not a hard sell. When people approach the table he recently set up at a St. Anne service, he asks if they’d like information on Bellarmine. That’s all. Joining him at the table is Michael Maude, Jr., who attended his first retreat at Bellarmine last year. He is accompanied by his two sons, Mike, 14, and Benjamin, 12. Nancy Herr, the women’s team captain, is giving information about the women’s three-day silent retreats held in October and April each year.

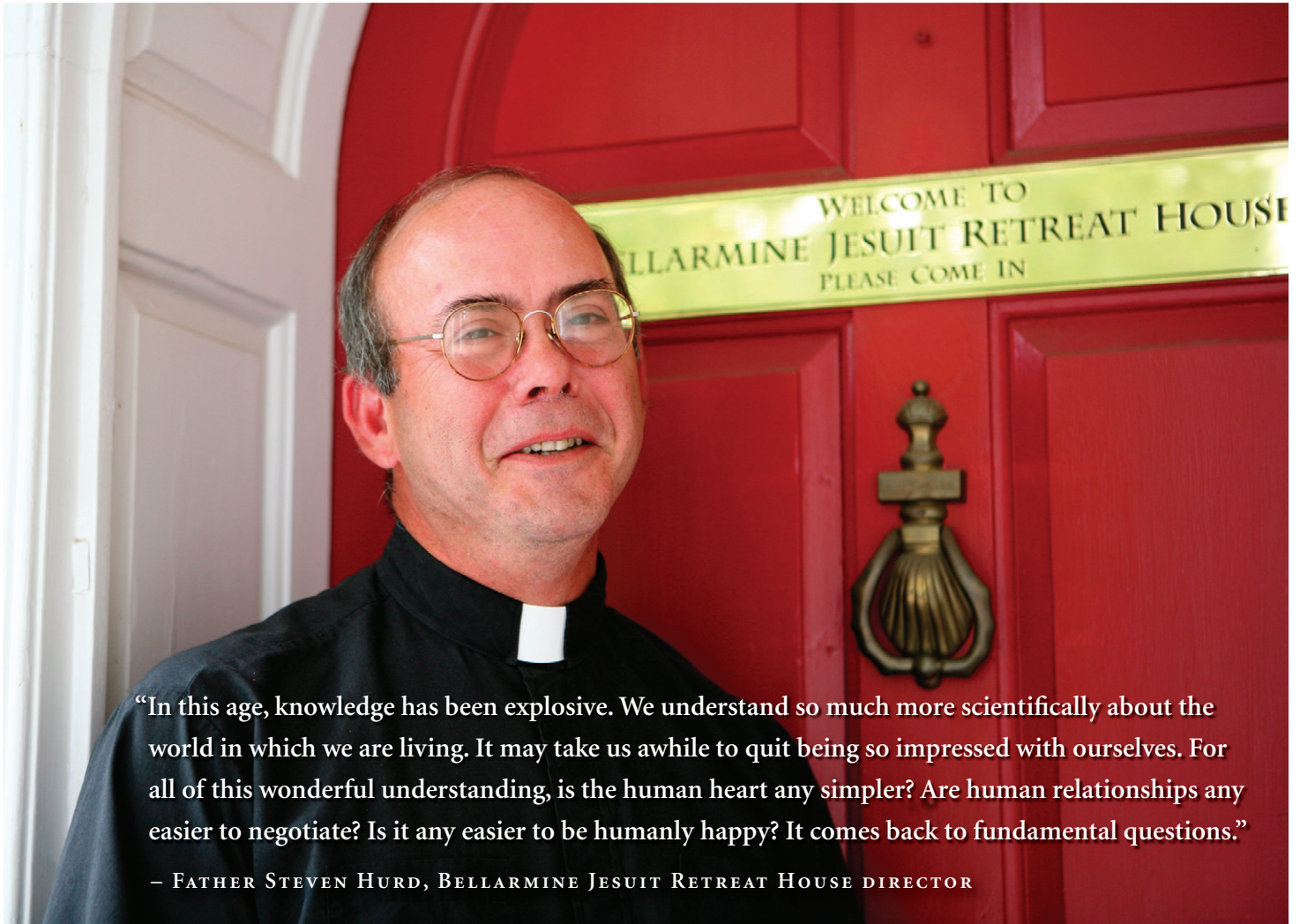
Michael Maude, Jr. is grateful to have such a place close by. He has driven by the retreat house entrance many times while taking his kids to sports activities or to attend business meetings, but last year he needed some time to himself. “I needed to calm down, slow down, and look inward. My priorities were mixed up. While on retreat at Bellarmine, those priorities became crystal clear to me and remain so.” He was first introduced to spiritual retreats while attending Jesuit schools, but he had never attended one as a husband, father, and business owner. Of the experience he says, “I prayed, I ate, I slept, and I cried.”

An examined life

Driving or walking around Bellarmine is one thing; to be in it is another. The arched entrance door is surrounded by white pillars but is not grand. The scale is that of an average house. With a squeeze on the knob and a slight push, the door opens to the parlor.

An oil painting of St. Ignatius, the patron of retreats, hangs in the hallway. The spiritual exercises espoused by Ignatius guide those who dwell here. The first reads in part: “The goal of our life is to be with God forever. We should not fix our desires on health or sickness, wealth or poverty, success or failure, a long life or a short one....” But Father Hurd says reading is not experience: “It is like reading a recipe for a cake and saying I baked a cake.” In his role as retreat master he guides people through the spiritual exercises, allowing them to experience and reflect on what is within the self.

A small chapel inside the old mansion contains no stained glass, except on the doors leading into it. The flowers near the altar are plastic. Sunlight



“In this age, knowledge has been explosive. We understand so much more scientifically about the world in which we are living. It may take us awhile to quit being so impressed with ourselves. For all of this wonderful understanding, is the human heart any simpler? Are human relationships any easier to negotiate? Is it any easier to be humanly happy? It comes back to fundamental questions.”

– FATHER STEVEN HURD, BELLARMINE JESUIT RETREAT HOUSE DIRECTOR

slides through the shutters on the windows. Here the retreatants are invited to listen to talks and experience the *examen*—a form of Christian meditation. It is a guided method of remembering and reflecting on the ordinary events of the day.

Father Hurd describes it this way: “It is a daily opportunity to be aware for what I am grateful. To ask, ‘Am I doing well or poorly?’ It is a reminder of what I am trying to do and bringing that into greater harmony.” When he talks about spiritual issues, he shuts his eyes and a short, closed-lipped smile appears. He says people need to become aware of what’s happening in their lives or what has happened and why. “People are busy or they are right. But some say, ‘Stop, wait. I need to take stock of what’s going on here.’ Any psychologist will tell you it is great therapy. Understanding comes at many different levels.”

Personal enlightenment is not the goal, however. If that is all one achieves, Father Hurd says it has ended in the wrong place. “It is about becoming a better person. Christ said, ‘I give peace.’ Finding that peace within allows you to become an instrument of peace in your relationships and the world around you.”

Many retreatants say their relationships do improve. “The retreats at Bellarmine help me get a better handle on life,” says Caiazza. “Sometimes I get a new perspective or find a new direction. The inner peace I find is very rewarding.” Inspired by their retreat experience, Caiazza and Maude are part of a Thursday morning men’s group at St. Anne Catholic Church.

The one-on-one conferences are Father Hurd’s favorite part of the retreat. “I am almost always profoundly touched by what people say. I feel tremendously privileged to be with good people who are trying to be even better. I am grateful for them and the encouragement they give. It takes the edge off the pessimism around the world.”

A generous place

There are no “must do’s” here. The passageways inside the building are as accessible as the walking paths outside. There seems to be no off-limits area. Retreatants meander in the living or dining rooms, the library, and resource center. A ringing buzzer lets them know when an exercise is about to begin and when meals are ready. They are invited to listen to talks given by the retreat master, but attendance is not required. They can spend time the way they choose, unencumbered by anyone’s agenda. They are to let themselves be.

One spiritual director described Bellarmine as the “Four Seasons” of retreat houses, yet it is modest in its decor. In the 72 private bedrooms, 40 of which are air-conditioned, there is no television or radio—only a twin bed, a chair, the Bible, and a book by Cardinal Joseph Bernardin, Chicago’s archbishop until his death in 1996.

Retreatants dress casually, share meals, and come prepared as if they were staying at a motel for the weekend. Meals are served in the dining room at several communal tables that seat eight people each.

Imagine eight women sitting together over a meal and not talking. Nancy Herr and her friends Jeanine VanDeVelde and Sue Walsh say while it might seem impossible, it happens at Bellarmine. Each cherishes this time “to be alone with God and reflect.” They say it is hard to put into words how important “their vacation with God” is to them. Sue says, “It is like visiting a dear old friend.”

A silent retreat may not be for everybody. Trina Gizel, a decidedly expressive person who loves to talk, can’t think of spending days in silence. “I would implode,” she says. A friend with a high-powered job said he could not listen to his own thoughts, as it would drive him crazy. “It’s why I am always listening to the radio, on my cell phone, or working on the computer,” he says. Father Hurd laughs when he hears Trina’s comment, then furrows his brow: “I think they underestimate themselves.”

Preserving the peace

Bellarmino depends on voluntary donations from retreatants for its funding. They say limited financial resources should not prevent anyone from making a retreat. For those who can afford it, \$250 covers expenses for a three-day retreat. Many people give more, allowing for an open invitation to all.

“If we can create the time, space, and opportunity for a person to do what they need to do, that’s what we’re here for,” says Father Hurd.

Remarking on a national survey that describes top holiday stressors as finances and having too much to do, he advises, “A good holiday will be shared by those who know what they are grateful for. If hearts are in the right place, the dinner table will be a much happier place. The central questions are: ‘Why am I doing this?’ Not, ‘Why I am supposed to be doing it?’ And, ‘What part of me does this come from? What makes it worthwhile?’”

Unlike a church, at Bellarmine there are no special services for the holidays. On Thanksgiving last year, Father Hurd could be found mulching leaves dropped by the “long-life” oaks. At Christmas, members of the Knights of Columbus erect the manger scene at Bellarmine’s entrance. Most of the staff visit their families during holidays. The quiet is unintentional, broken only by the birds’ songs. The peace is preserved in the hearts and minds of those who have visited here. U

For more information on the Bellarmine Jesuit Retreat House, visit www.bellarminhall.org. Mary Klest is a **QUINTESSENTIAL BARRINGTON** contributing writer.



Frank Caiazza (top) has attended retreats at Bellarmine for the past 27 years. A busy professional, he schedules the time as a priority on his calendar. Nancy Herr (middle), never attended a retreat while she was raising her family. Now she attends the women’s retreat each year with friends. Michael Maude, Jr. (bottom) spent three days in silence at Bellarmine last year. He says he learned to recognize his fears and trust God.