

SECOND-YEAR PRINCIPAL
FATHER STEVE KIM
SEEKS TO INNOVATE IN
ADMISSIONS STRATEGY
AND IN THE CLASSROOM
WHILE CULTIVATING
RELATIONSHIPS WITH
THE COMMUNITY.

STORY BY CHRISTINE SCHRECK
PHOTOS BY CHUCK DECKERT

SMALL SCHOOL, BIG IMPACT

Father Steve Kim, new principal of Saint Joseph Notre Dame High School in Alameda, waves to students during a passing period.

ORDAINED AT AGE 25 FOR THE DIOCESE OF SAN JOSE, FATHER STEVE KIM HAS BEEN BUSY EVER SINCE. AFTER A DECADE AT ST. FRANCIS HIGH SCHOOL IN MOUNTAIN VIEW IN TEACHING, CAMPUS MINISTRY AND ADMINISTRATION, HE BECAME PRINCIPAL OF SAINT JOSEPH NOTRE DAME (SJND) IN 2023, TASKED WITH FOCUSING ON CATHOLIC IDENTITY AND SUSTAINABILITY.

HANDS-ON LEADERSHIP

He encourages everyone to call him Father Steve because it makes him seem more approachable and pastoral. “I see myself not as an administrator. I see myself as a pastor. The pastor of the school. A shepherd,” he explained. His energy, presence and openness have revitalized this school community.

During a passing period, standing outside St. Joseph Basilica, he greeted passing students by name, with fist bumps or by asking questions that showed knowledge of details about their activities, interests and families.

His enthusiasm and style of leadership has encouraged the entire administration to share his commitment to building relationships with the students. Dean of Academics Mustafa Siddiquee teaches one section of AP Physics. It’s his favorite part of the day. Dean of Students Geoffrey Godfrey says, “I know their first,

middle and last name. I know their parents. I have a good idea of their baseline behavior, so I know when something is off, when they’re having some challenges. I know what to look for when students are not meeting our expectations.”

Father Kim created a Principal Advisory Committee, in which he meets every month with 10-15 students, in an open forum for discussion. “I don’t see many schools do things like that where it’s principal and student conversations,” said senior Trigo Salgado, “but within this community, it was really open-ended. I felt like I could have spoken about anything, really.”

Father Kim’s pride in the SJND faculty is evident in the way he introduces the teachers and speaks about them. The feeling is mutual, with science teacher Katie Harp noting that Father Kim baptized her baby.

Harp said, “He not only will listen to your ideas, but he’s really good at wanting to implement them. If he really believes in what you’re saying, he figures out how to do it, which is better than any other admin I’ve ever worked with.”

Band teacher Paula Cekola said Father Kim donned a Santa hat and played the sleigh bells for a promotional video for last year’s winter concert.

“I would say that Father Steve is very active. I see him around all the time. The entire administration, actually – principal, vice principal, the deans – are all very active, very involved with the students. I love that they know the students and are very accessible,” said Maggie Finnessy, who came to SJND three years ago as an Alliance for Catholic Education (ACE) teacher and stayed beyond the two-year commitment



This bookshelf in the corner of Father Kim’s office tells the story of his priesthood – the “Faithful to the Bay” flag for his time as chaplain of the 49ers, the USC pennant for where he received his doctorate, the water from Lourdes for his chaplaincy for the Order of Malta, and the soccer jersey for the summer he spent in Guadalajara as a seminarian.

and is now the head of the science department.

Father Kim will be returning to the classroom in the spring, teaching a Catholic Entrepreneurship class in collaboration with Catholic University of America. Similar to a class he taught at St. Francis, 26 students have signed up for the inaugural class and will receive both high school and college credit. He is working with the College of Alameda to offer dual enrollment communications and ethnic studies classes as well.

FOSTERING COMMUNITY

St. Joseph Notre Dame, St. Joseph Basilica and St. Joseph Elementary School have a history of cooperation when it comes to sharing facilities on Chestnut Street, but current administrators of the three are prioritizing building community.

Father Kim and parochial administrator Father Mario Rizzo take turns celebrating Mass for the school. Father Rizzo noted that many of the parishioners are SJND alumni or parents of alumni and are invested in the school’s success.

Faculty members have noticed an increase in Father Rizzo’s presence at the school. “He’s been giving the prayer in the morning and been present a lot more. It always felt like Father Mario’s over there and we’re over here. Now, we’re building that communication, and with the elementary,” Cekola said.

Elementary school principal Danielle Colvert likes the increased cooperation. “Father Steve’s visible presence, openness and interest has led to a lot of opportunities,” she said. Those opportunities include an early-morning geometry class for eighth graders,

after-school debate and book clubs facilitated by high school faculty, the after-school music program students playing in the high school spring band concert and tutoring provided by the high school students. “They’re students the families can trust because they’re our neighbors at the high school,” Colvert said.

VALUE OF SMALL

“Bigger isn’t always better,” Father Kim said. He uses the analogy of Costco and Trader Joe’s to demonstrate. Both are successful in different ways, and there is room for both in the retail space, with customers getting quality items in bulk from Costco and friendlier customer service from Trader Joe’s.

SJND offers a program called Pathways for students interested in pursuing biomedical sciences, engineering or, new this year, visual and performing arts. That interest is the main prerequisite

for any of the programs, although placement testing or an interview with the faculty member in charge may be required. “We set the students up for success,” Assistant Director of Admissions Haley Graybeal, a 2019 SJND graduate who completed the biomedical sciences pathway, said. Pathways are open to all students.

The smaller setting allows for more students to become leaders. “Some students come in shy, and because of the small environment, they are able to grow and be leaders,” Father Kim said.

Last spring, he told graduates and their families that companies are looking for job candidates who display adaptability. “Students in a small school are primed for adaptability,” he said. “In a bigger school, there’s so many students competing for the same things. You’re going to be that guy. You’re going to be the theater person or the athlete, and there’s no room for anything else. Here, because we’re so small, I see students who play in a baseball game then come back to practice for the play. They’re part of ASB but also playing

“

We’re like a Trader Joe’s. We want that high touch – small community, big impact is what we’re all about.”



Science teacher Katie Harp and Father Steve Kim chat outside Harp’s classroom. Harp appreciates Father Kim’s responsiveness to faculty, and he baptized her younger child.

“

I see him around all the time. The entire administration, actually – principal, vice principal, the deans – are all very active, very involved with the students. I love that they know the students and are very accessible.”

– Maggie Finnessy, science teacher

softball, and that’s kind of what’s missing where so many things are specialized now. High school is the opportunity to discover and try different things, and a small school setting is what allows you to try different things and to be able to adapt.”

NEW APPROACH TO ADMISSIONS

With the freshman class at 112 and the largest class in the school, “things are trending up,” Father Kim said.

He uses his priestly role to help promote the school. Strategically choosing parishes in proximity to SJND, he calls the pastor and offers to give him a weekend off, celebrating Masses in English, Spanish or Vietnamese, during which he offers a five-minute promotion for SJND. He distributes promotional material, brings students and gives parishioners a chance to get to know him.

His strategy, he explains, is to “claim the island,” enrolling the majority of students from the two closest Catholic elementary schools this fall. He has also made connections with the charter, private and independent schools in Alameda.

Social media plays a key role in this strategy, targeting students who are increasingly making the high school choice for themselves. SJND’s latest admissions video was a student-driven production. “By the students, for the students,” he said, noting additional projects are in the works.

EVANGELIZATION

At their WASC accreditation last year, the committee asked the school to work on its mission statement. Instead of rewriting it, Father Kim and the staff refocused it, turning the last sentence into an acronym: S-scholarship, J-joy, N-nurturing faith, D-dedicated to service.

This year is dedicated to service, and a service requirement has been reintroduced for students, a comprehensive 70-hour commitment over four years.

In his own life of service, Father Kim believes that being present with the students on a daily basis is his best way to prepare them for life. “My job is to prepare citizens for heaven but have a good time on earth while you’re at it. Education is the best way. At a parish, I see students one hour per week, if that. Here, I see them every day. I get to know them and their stories.”

“Evangelization has to be done in different ways to different people. We’re all searching for something, something bigger, something meaningful,” he observed, noting that he adjusts the examples of his message to his audience, whether they are teenagers or the San Francisco 49ers, for whom he serves as Catholic chaplain. The core message remains the same. “We’re all searching for something – fame, money, acceptance. The answer is God.” ▲



FOR MORE INFORMATION

Visit www.sjnd.org/admission.