

Redemptorist St. Gerard to host first fundraiser

By **Richard Meek**

The Catholic Commentator

Redemptorist St. Gerard School has a proud tradition of educational excellence, serving the north Baton Rouge area for more than five decades.

St. Gerard's alumni boasts many of the area's most influential leaders but changing demographics have created financial challenges for the school that people so fondly remember. Enrollment has stagnated in recent years although there are recent signs of a resurgence, and the historic building with halls safeguarding 50 years of memories constantly require repair.

"For a while we tried to breathe under the water as best we could," said Father Tat Hoang CSsR, pastor at St. Gerard Majella Church in Baton Rouge. "But to some extent we cannot do it any longer."

Redemptorist St. Gerard principal Cheryl Domino added

the school "needs a cushion to sustain ourselves."

Help is on the way with a significant boost from chef John Folse. The school is hosting its inaugural fundraiser, "Messengers of Hope," on March 20 at Folse's White Oak Estate and Garden in Baton Rouge beginning at 5 p.m. The evening will feature a cocktail hour, dinner prepared by Folse, live music and live and silent auctions.

Proceeds will be dedicated to the school for academic enhancements, including the potential offering of STEM and STEAM courses.

"It's very exciting," Domino said. "When I think I am on my last leg, this kind of interest sparks me and says I can make it. Somebody is behind me. People understand the cause, and it keeps you focused to say you can do this even when it looks dim."

Father Hoang, who has been a one-man dynamo in reviving not only the school but the church in



Ruth Oliver, a teacher at Redemptorist St. Gerard School in Baton Rouge, shares a fist bump with one of her students. A fundraiser has been planned to help St. Gerard, which is experiencing a resurgence in its North Baton Rouge location. Photo submitted by Father Tat Hoang CSsR | Redemptorist St. Gerard Church

his first two years at St. Gerard, said he was contacted by Folse about a potential fundraiser. Father Hoang said Folse told him, "Count me in. I am on your side. You can count on my sponsorship."

Father Hoang said Folse is donating his labor, food, cooking and the location for the gala.

The school's enrollment currently sits at about 150 students but Father Hoang's ultimate goal is 180 to 200 stu-

dents. He also understands the financial pressures that will create, hence the gala. "We need money to hire good teachers, staff, building maintenance," he said, adding that the funds raised will also be used for academic development and scholarships.

"Another purpose (for the fundraiser) is we have been here forever but when Redemptorist (High School) closed (in 2015) everybody thought we closed too," Father Hoang said. "We need to let people know the school exists and has been resurrected. We are very vibrant right now with a new mission."

Father Hoang and Domino agree preserving and extending the school's legacy is important for the entire community but especially in North Baton Rouge.

"We want to give the (area) as a whole a positive influence instead of all of the negative you hear," Domino said.

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Redemptorist St. Gerard maintains a strong Catholic discipline, which separates it from charter schools or even some private schools, Father Hoang said.

"We have good kids, they love God, they go to church on Friday and every morning and every afternoon they pray," Father Hoang said. "I'm very proud of our students. When you see them you fall in love with them."

He is notably excited about the possibility of adding STEM classes, saying the students excel in liberal arts.


"If you give them music, they can perform that," he said. "I want them to develop liberal arts, reading, writing, speaking, history and even politics because they are good at it."

"Hopefully (St. Gerard) will become a school of liberal arts and music."

Tickets are \$200 per person and can be purchased through the school at 225-355-1437.

Dress is semi-formal.

"This is the first (fundraiser for Redemptorist) and we don't want to be too casual," Father Hoang said.



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