

Alex Karaniwan

SENIOR - 2nd Place

Alumni Senior Writing Contest - 2016

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Even before my first day at St. Augustine High School, I had heard of the unique "Saints Experience" that could not be found anywhere else. This played a large role in attracting my parents to the school and ultimately was one of the biggest factors in them sending me to Saints. I did not immediately realize what this experience was, in fact, I missed it entirely during most of my freshman year and nearly transferred to another school. Now after four years at the school, I truly understand and appreciate what the Saints Experience is and realize how blessed I am to have been able to become a Saintsman. The experience is deep rooted in the school's tradition, those particular aspects of the school that have not changed over the many decades since the school's inception. Each student finds the core of their experience in someone or something; my experience began and was defined by my cross country coach, Jeremiah Downey. Not only an excellent coach, Downey was a mentor, friend, and ultimately the best role model of what it means to be a Saintsman.

Having a light, skinny build, I ruled out freshman football as an option for a fall sport. With my mom's convincing, I joined the cross country team and attended the first practice in mid-August. A nice, older man introduced himself to me as Coach Downey, and I will always remember how welcome he made me feel on that day. Coming from a public middle school thirty minutes away from Saints, I essentially knew no one at the school and thus was hesitant to begin talking to any of the other runners there. Luckily, Downey was more than willing to introduce me to the other people who had come and I was relieved that I had received his assistance. Over the following weeks, Downey detailed how important and prevalent tradition would be during my time at Saints. When I did begin school, I quickly realized just how important tradition was to life at Saints. Ranging from Freshman Welcome Week to the

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inevitable heartburn after eating a double cheeseburger at Ted's, I found that I would experience many of the exact same things that other freshmen previously had for years.

As my first year continued, I felt as if I was missing the vital connection to Saints that the other students around me appeared to have. Going into the second semester, I began filling out an application for Steele Canyon High School as I was feeling serious doubts on if attending Saints was really worth it. I was divided on what to do, and only two days before the application was due was my decision swayed back to remaining at Saints. Coach Downey served as the voice of reason for me, as I had raised my dilemma with him while he was subbing for one of my classes and received an unexpected response. He quite clearly told me that while Saints may not be for everyone, he believed that if I stayed I would find the school to be more than worthwhile if I was willing to be patient and define my own Saints Experience. I decided I would remain at Saints for one more year, and would give everything I could into my experience in hopes that I would eventually connect with the school.

Once the track season started, I finally began to feel comfortable with the school and its dynamic environment. No longer was I uncomfortable at mass, and I had found a solid group of friends. On the track, Downey pushed me increasingly harder and believed that I had massive potential in becoming a great runner. At the same time, he stressed the importance of maintaining my grades even in the early years of high school, as it was important for me to look to the future and always prepare myself to be in a successful position. Both in running and other endeavors in my life, Downey always told me how important building a foundation was, and it is a lesson I have not forgotten. Further strengthening my experience at Saints, Downey convinced me to join the newly created Saints Mock Trial team. It was interesting to learn from Coach that

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his nickname "The Judge" had stemmed from the fact that he was once an attorney. I never could have predicted how enjoyable this club would be over the four years I was part of the team, and I could not thank Downey enough for helping push me to join it and helping me with whatever questions I had about the cases we used. I grew closer with many new people in the school, and I greatly enhanced both my public speaking and critical thinking abilities.

By the middle of my junior year, I finally realized how appreciative I was for being able to attend Saints. The school had truly transformed me from a young, innocent boy into a one of a kind Saintsman. For the first couple years at the school, I never really grasped what actually defined a Saintsman. However, through Downey's example I came to learn how a Saintsman is a man unlike any other. A Saintsman first and foremost is a gentleman, someone who is courteous and respects everyone. Downey was understanding of all students' struggles and issues, whether it be in school, on the field, or at home. I was always able to count on him to hear my complaints and I valued his advice. Downey encompassed everything that a Saintsman is, he valued education, athletics, and most importantly God. Before every race Downey would gather us together to pray that we would use our God given talents to the best of our abilities. By following Downey's footsteps I have become a better friend, son, student, and Christian.

The summer following my junior year I was devastated to hear that Downey would not be returning to the school the next year. I could not understand why he was not coming back, for I had been exchanging emails with him regarding the upcoming cross country season and summer workouts. I attempted to send him an email asking why he decided to leave, but sadly never received a reply. When my senior year started I was disappointed and sad that he was no longer present at the school. On a cold November day, I received the news that Coach Downey

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had died at his home earlier that morning. I was broken in the following weeks, I felt I had never thanked him enough for everything he had done for me.

As my senior year has progressed, I have not forgotten what Downey gave to me and carried out my final year at Saints the way he would have wanted. Now that my time at Saints is coming to a close, I fully comprehend how Downey truly has made my Saints Experience complete and transformed me into a Saintsman. Although no students from this point will ever have known Downey personally, I have emphasized to both the cross country and track teams the importance that his legacy never die. I still pray to Downey whenever I need help, and I am reassured knowing that he will be watching over me as I begin my journey as an adult in the real world.