



"There are real rescues needed sometimes," says Joe Aliotti, Dean of Students at De La Salle High School in Concord. "Kids can easily get into situations that they can't handle. It's a great feeling when a student comes to you, even much later maybe, and says, 'You know, I was really on the edge back there, and you really helped me out; you made a difference.'" Encountering students at their most vulnerable times, and responding to the crises and emergencies inevitable in the daily life of a school can be challenging, but also rewarding.



# Calm Through the Storms

**THE DEAN OF STUDENTS PLAYS A CENTRAL ROLE IN HELPING STUDENTS – AND SCHOOLS – MANAGE THE CHALLENGES THAT COME WITH HIGH SCHOOL LIFE.**

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"I depend on Saint La Salle. The twelve virtues of a teacher are also the twelve virtues of a dean, especially vigilance and patience. You have to listen carefully and quietly, to develop a real knowledge of the students, so that you can do the most important part of the job, which is finding solutions rather than giving punishments. Often you have to involve parents, teachers, and students, sit down for a conference, and listen to all concerns. It involves nurturing, really. I'm clear and firm, but I'm flexible, too. I really want the kids to find their way through whatever the trouble is, so that they can succeed."

*Mike Trafecanty, in his fifth year as Dean of Students at Cathedral High School in Los Angeles*

Illustration by: Simon Shaw

Success, in a Lasallian school, means learning and growth, and these are not simple phenomena, nor are they always easily achievable. Conflict and difficulty are bound to occur, and on many levels. Even the strongest school communities face challenges, simply by virtue of the fact that hundreds of individuals come together on a school campus for eight or more hours every day, and at Lasallian high schools, the majority of those individuals are between the wonderful but complex

social studies teacher, baseball coach and athletic director. “Most folks look at the Dean as the ‘tough guy’ or a strict disciplinarian. In reality, it is much more. The purpose of the Dean’s work is to help students grow. That’s a larger goal than just enforcing school rules.”

### Setting Up Students to Succeed

Deans in Lasallian schools work from the principle that discipline and order in the community – which are necessary and beneficial to everyone – are largely about prevention. For Deans, drawing on the virtue of *vigilance* is key, putting in place good systems so that small

LEO Center in Oakland. “The Dean of Students is responsible for the good order of the whole school and the relationships that make up the school.” For most schools, such relationships also go beyond the campus boundaries and out into the neighborhoods and local communities.

The Dean monitors attendance, makes sure that expectations about behavior are clear and well-publicized, assigns and trains prefects in the school, gives orientations and refreshers on classroom management to teachers, and meets with parents when needed. Security measures, crisis plans, emergency procedures, legal issues of responsi-

**“Developing solid relationships with others is at the core of a Lasallian school, and the Dean of Students is in a great spot to nurture those relationships. Respecting students means treating them like adults – but expecting them to act like kids. Young people will remember how we treat them longer than they may remember the algebra or history we teach them.”**

– Bill George, seven years as Dean of Students at La Salle Milwaukie, now Principal

ages of 14 and 18. Look closely, however, and at the very center of the high school community one can find the Dean of Students, providing support to many different people with many different needs, but with one goal in mind – the good of the student.

“The role of Dean of Students is very misunderstood,” says Bill George, now in his fourth year as Principal of La Salle High School in Milwaukie, Oregon. George was Dean of Students at La Salle for seven years, and in his 25 years at the school has also been a counselor,

problems are handled before they become big problems. But crises and emergencies are inevitable, and the Dean of Students is responsible for handling these with the virtues of *patience* and *humility*, hearing out all parties and maintaining calm, to ensure that the crisis moment can become a moment of learning for whoever is involved – students, teachers, or parents.

“The Dean of Students deals with more than students,” points out Brother Robb Wallace, FSC, who was Dean at Cathedral High School in Los Angeles for three years and currently works at the

bility and liability, and the thousand natural shocks that a high school is heir to – from managing proms to dealing with threats of bombs – are all in a day’s work for the Dean of Students. Sensitivity, creativity, and importantly, confidentiality, come with the job description. John Scudder, now Principal of Sacred Heart Cathedral Preparatory in San Francisco, but for eight years its Dean of Students, says, “. . . planning and attention to detail are a big part of the job of Dean of Students. His job is to set up students to succeed.”

### A Healthy Balance

Veterans of the position insist that the Dean as Dean is neither parent nor teacher nor counselor, and must be careful to keep a certain distance, not stepping into those roles, even when it might be the simplest approach to take. The Dean does everything possible to respect the Lasallian principles that parents are the primary educators of their children and that teachers are the primary managers of their classrooms. Jol reflects, “The I Students has a to walk; he’s re sort of broker,

getting kids in touch with the adults who can help them – sometimes that means their own parents. The Dean is responsible for boundary-setting and for holding students accountable, which aren’t the most popular topics with students. But as they mature, they get it and appreciate what you did for them. Years later they may tell you, ‘Now I understand what you were doing back then.’”

Sacred Heart Cathedral, “An important part of my job is figuring out how to intervene in a way that helps people to improve their relationships. To that end, I work closely with the counseling department.”

### Founding Principles Provide Grounding and Guidance

“To perfect those who are committed to our care we

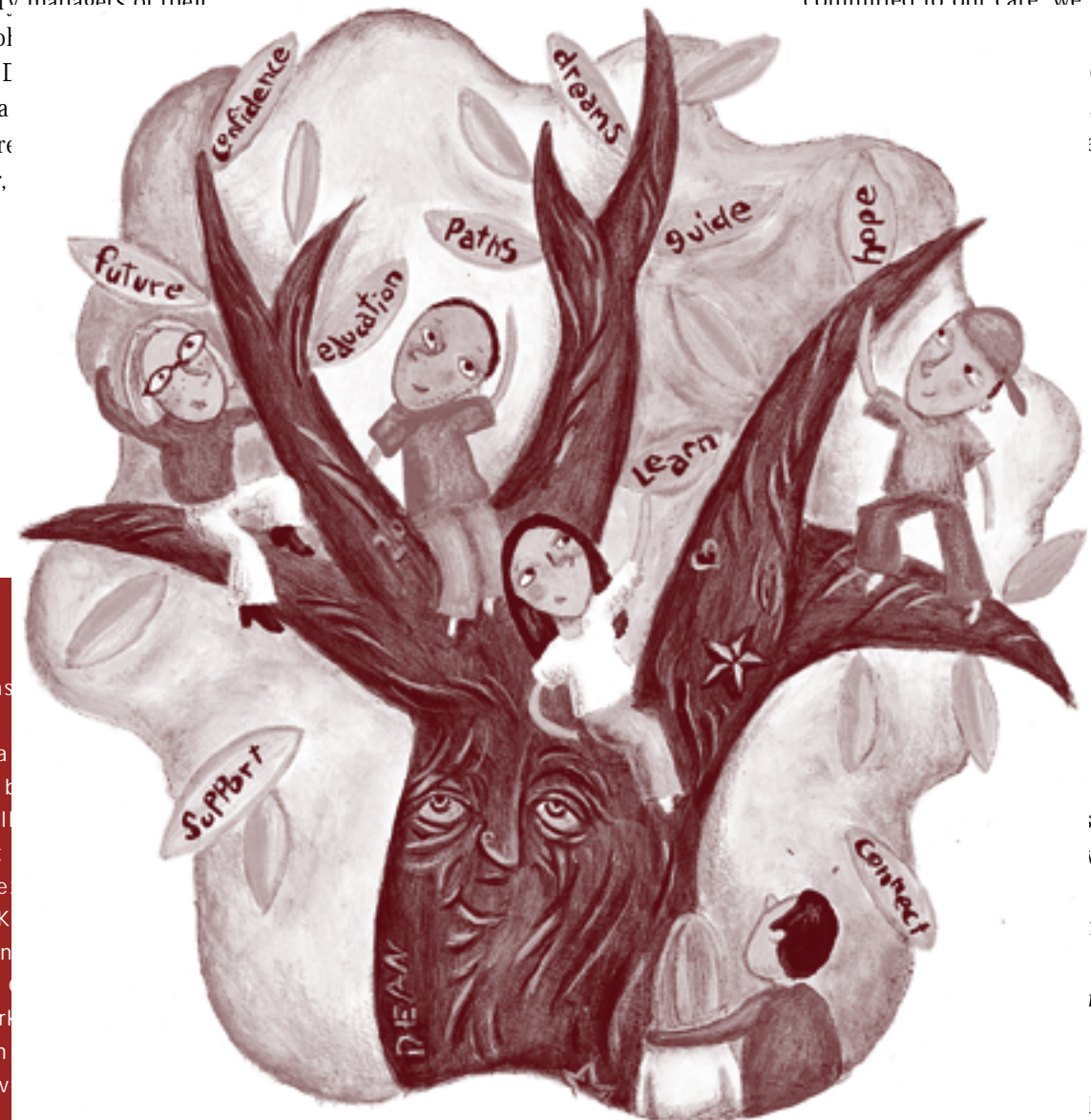


Illustration by: Cindy Revell

“The image of the Dean of Students as a tree is a good one – a support with connecting all the school. It at the comple of the job.” K McGuire, Prin Saint Mary’s School in Berk that the Dean and supportiv of a school’s groups, providing a place where students, teachers, and parents can connect in order to resolve problems, and ultimately, to grow.

Mike Trafecanty, now in his fifth year as Dean at Cathedral High School says, “You’re trying to empower people – students, teachers, parents – to make their relationships work.” Adds Mario Sazo, third-year Dean of Students at

often and truly that John Baptist de La Salle was extraordinary in his principle of respect for students. Why, then, is nearly half of *The Conduct* devoted to “order” in the schools, with frequent use of

**“When you get to know the inner workings of students’ lives, sometimes you’re amazed at the stresses and difficulties they are coping with. So if discipline is needed, you do it with respect, and you communicate that the purpose is to help them grow. Some can hear that right away, others need time to be able to hear it.**

**But if I’m fair and consistent, I’m showing them that I care.”**

– Jay Lawson, 11 years as Dean of Students at Saint Mary’s College High School in Berkeley, now Athletic Director

words such as “correction” and “discipline”? Bill George understands why: “Respecting students means treating them like adults – but expecting them to act like kids.”

Formation programs for Brothers and Partners involved in every aspect of school life are key components of the efforts of the San Francisco District to strengthen understanding and practice of the Lasallian educational tradition. Such programs combine traditional materials and the latest information. Workshops for Deans explore Lasallian philosophy, provide experts who speak on pertinent issues, and give Deans an opportunity to discuss challenges and work on solving problems together. “If you think you’re failing because you’ve been in the job two years and can’t solve a certain problem,” says Jay Lawson, for 11 years the Dean of Students at Berkeley’s Saint Mary’s High, “it’s good to have somebody who has been doing it for six years let you know that, hey, you’re not failing, it’s all part of the job.”

### The Heart of the Matter

Given its nature, the job can be stressful. “The Dean of Students’ job differs from other administrative jobs in that you’re not very often able to plan and carry out a normal workday,” offers Jay Lawson. “You’re always responding to suddenly emerging problems, dealing with the unexpected. It can make for a tough workday.” But it’s not just the barrage of external events that can challenge a Dean of Students. Beneath every attendance problem, every fistfight, and every crisis or emergency lie human feelings. Says Brother Robb, “The Dean of Students is, in a special way, at the heart of the school, because what he has to deal with puts him right in the midst of people’s emotions, their turmoil, and their vulnerability and confusion. That’s a very demanding spot in which to be day after day.”

### Making Lasting Connections

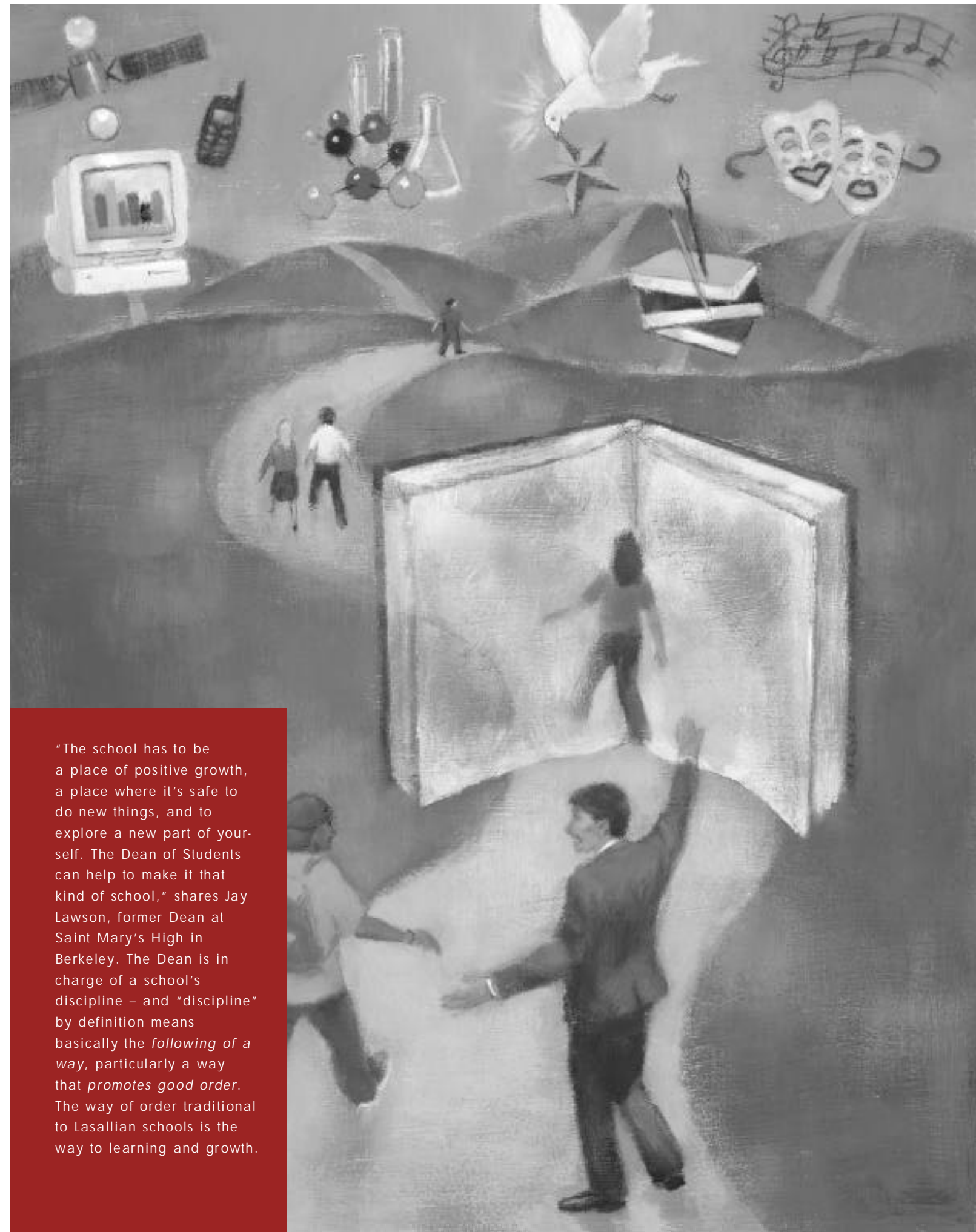
As those old advertisements for the army used to say: It’s the toughest job you’ll ever love.

Mario Sazo puts it succinctly: “The Dean of Students does the dirty work.” And he smiles. “I love my job.” It’s a refrain heard again and again.

In most schools, the job title used to be “Dean of Discipline.” The new and improved job title, however, is perhaps a bit truncated, because in the last analysis, the Dean of Students is a dean for everybody – parents, teachers, coaches, and administrators; a central resource connecting the whole educational community. “Helping teachers with classroom management, dealing with parents’ concerns, trying to get to the root of problems brought up by students, making sure the school functions well day by day – these are all aspects of the job,” says Jay Lawson.

And for a Dean of Students, as for every Lasallian educator, the very deepest principle of the job is the one stated many times and in many ways by the Founder – *for the Lasallian educator, the encounter with a student is always an encounter with God*. Mike Trafecanty affirms: “I feel the truth of that particular principle very strongly. That’s why the job of Dean of Students is so great but so challenging – I see God in my office every day. And some days, I have to phone his parents.” ❁

Illustration by Felipe Echevarria



“The school has to be a place of positive growth, a place where it’s safe to do new things, and to explore a new part of yourself. The Dean of Students can help to make it that kind of school,” shares Jay Lawson, former Dean at Saint Mary’s High in Berkeley. The Dean is in charge of a school’s discipline – and “discipline” by definition means basically the *following of a way*, particularly a way that *promotes good order*. The way of order traditional to Lasallian schools is the way to learning and growth.