

personality

# FATHER GREGORY BONFIGLIO

**F**ather Gregory Bonfiglio, who took the helm of Jesuit High School in fall 2002, talks about the 40-year-old all-boys educational institution, life as priest and the joy of being a regular guy in a local rowing club.

Jesuit High School—the well-respected boys' school located on Jacob Lane in Carmichael—has a new and interesting public face: Father Gregory Bonfiglio, a 44-year-old priest who possesses a quiet air of reflection, a deep commitment to education and a disarming smile. Although he's been the religious superior at Jesuit—and a sophomore theology teacher—since 1998, he was recently named the school's president, a job for which he's been on a very short list since nearly the moment he arrived on campus.

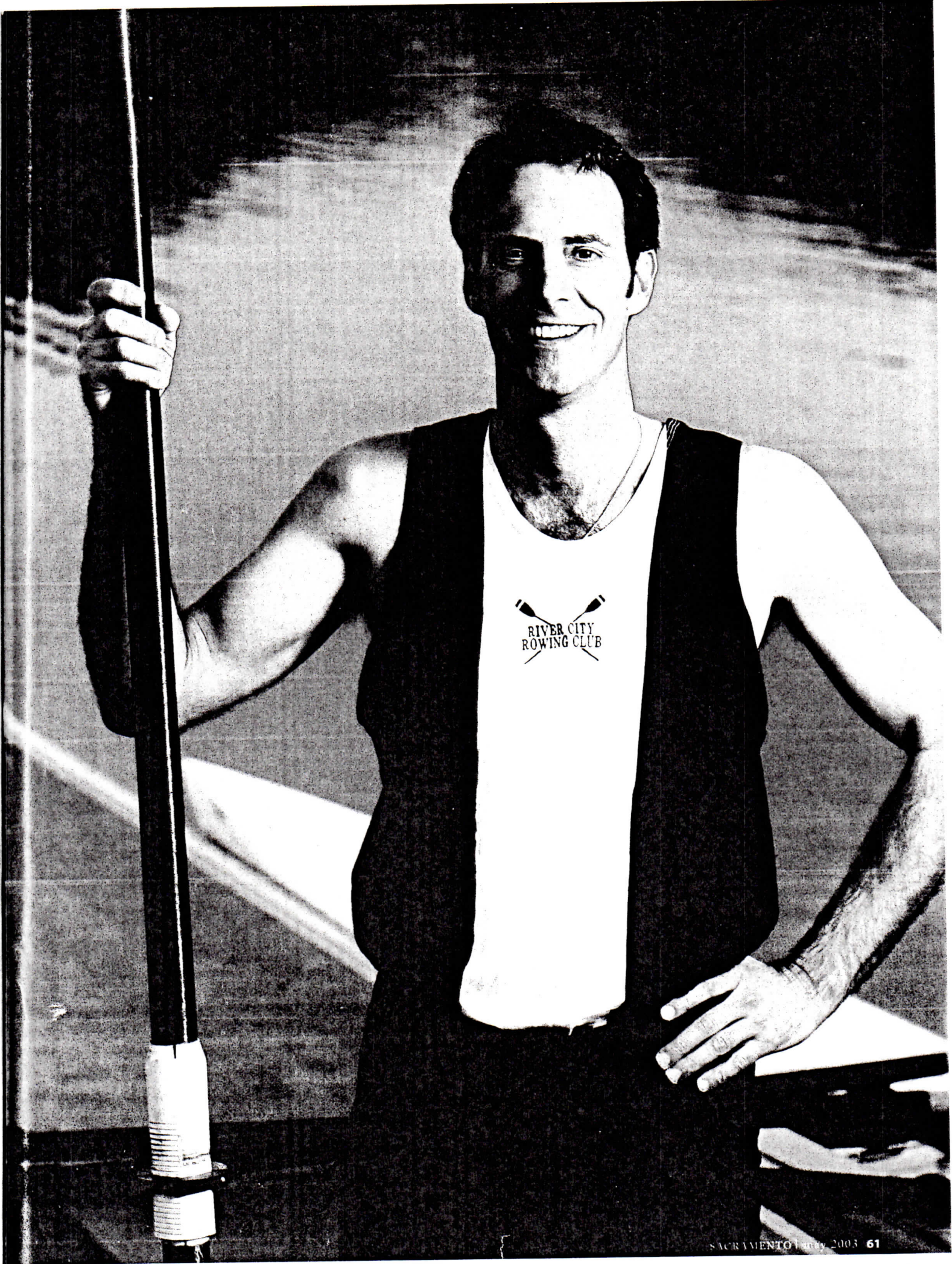
“He has a great ability to communicate—he's an absolutely perfect people person,” says Van Longyear, partner in a local civil litigation firm and the chair of Jesuit's board of trustees. “And he loves the kids. If you walk across campus with him, they light up when they see him, and he genuinely lights up, too. He has a wonderful connection with them.”

In fact, there's only one aspect of his new job Bonfiglio says he's reluctant about. “I miss the kids,” he says one afternoon in his new lamp-lit office, located in the hushed red brick administration building, overlooking a peaceful square of grapefruit and orange trees—far from the hustle and bustle of 1,000 adolescent males. “Being a

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teacher is fun. There were times kids would say something, and whether it was appropriate or not, it was so funny I had to laugh. They're always delightful—there's a lot of life there."

Beyond the fact that his contact with students is now more limited, however, Bonfiglio has no complaints. "I landed in a tub of butter," he says, his face breaking into a wide grin. "This is a great school—I feel so privileged to be here." In fact, Bonfiglio says his work at this campus is what gives his life "deep meaning and great purpose"—values he suggests are more important, in the end, than material wealth or social status. They also form the "values-based education" offered to students at Jesuit. "Teaching convinced me of the fact that our students want to be good people—like Martin Luther King, like St. Ignatius," he says, "but it's a complex world and our adolescents bear the brunt of it. They're developing skills, but these are not all in place yet, so their desire to be good people is challenged. This is why we do what we do at Jesuit High School."

Bonfiglio suggests the school's goal is to produce students who are not only intellectual and curious, but also caring and compassionate. "It's not a question of whether or not they'll serve, but where," he says.

All Jesuit students are required to perform a certain amount of community service each year: Freshmen, sophomores and juniors must complete 15 hours and seniors, 50. "We literally have students everywhere," says Joanne Castronova, director of Jesuit's community service office. Examples include Loaves & Fishes and Mustard Seed School downtown, Saddle Pals (an equestrian therapeutic program) and after-school tutoring at Oak Park Community Center. Many Jesuit alumni also are involved in community service through their college campuses and as working adults. "When I was in East L.A. at Dolores Mission Parish, we had a grammar school that almost closed twice," Bonfiglio says. "Finally, we formed a board that was made up of faculty and parents, of course, but also people from outside the community. Most of the people [who came in] were educated in a secondary Jesuit school."

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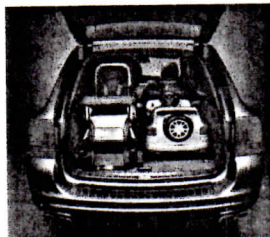
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There also is an ongoing effort to make the Sacramento Jesuit campus more economically diverse—to increase the percentage of low-income kids who attend. "Jesuit has a lot to offer that segment of the population," says Bonfiglio, "but I think they have more to offer us. Given the realities of the world, if we're to produce citizens who can make informed decisions in finance or medicine or law or the government, we need to understand the experiences of our brothers and sisters who come from other places."

Currently, the school is 30 percent ethnically diverse, has about a 20 percent non-Catholic population, and gives out more than \$500,000 a year in scholarships to needy students. (About 15 to 20 percent of Jesuit's students receive financial aid.) "We're financially blind with our admission practices," says Longyear. "We don't know if someone's in financial need until after we accept him. And we've never turned down a kid because of money."

"I'M ENGAGED IN  
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GIVES MY LIFE  
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The school's budget is lean, however, and both Longyear and Bonfiglio agree that to increase their ability to fund scholarships—as well as update the campus—money needs to come from somewhere besides tuition (\$7,850 annually per student). "It's always a balance between the costs of private education and keeping tuition low," says Longyear.

Part of Bonfiglio's new job, then, is "to grow Jesuit's endowment fund," a task made easier by his obvious pride in the school. "Fifty percent of our students score in the 75th percentile or below," he says. "We don't take just the brightest of the bright. But out of a class of 280, 250 will graduate, 85 to 95 percent will attend a four-year college and 98 to 100 percent will go on to college. That says a lot about the quality of our faculty, our counselors, our tutoring, our peer mentoring."



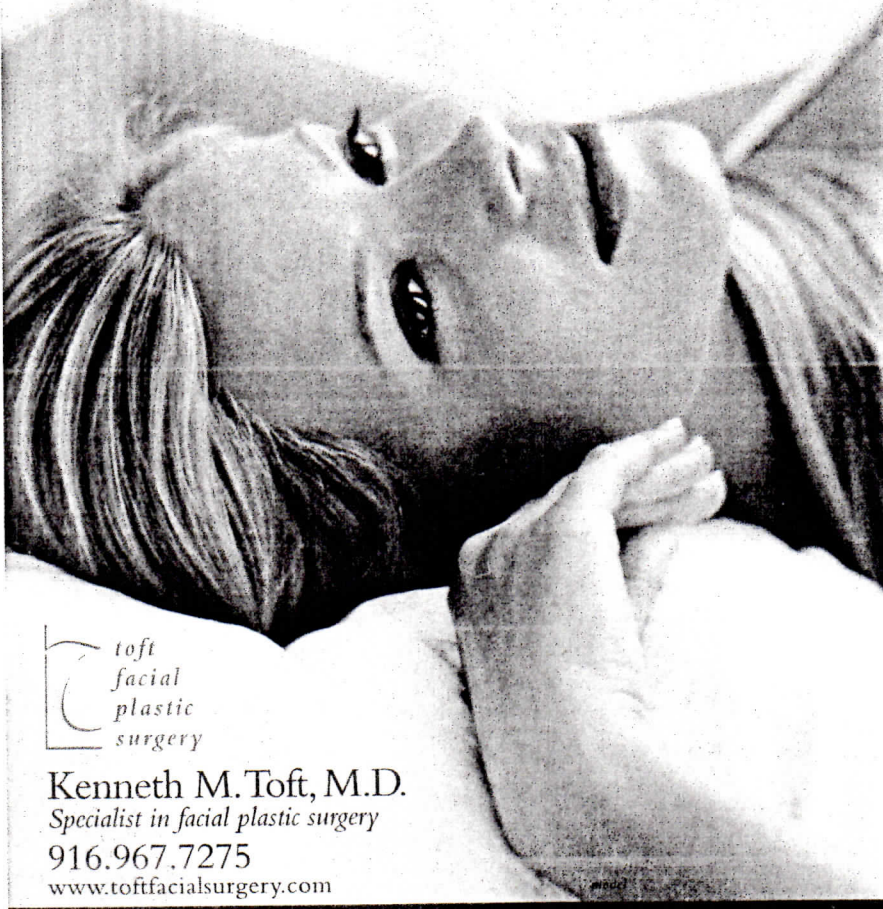
Despite his passion for his job, Bonfiglio is in many ways just a regular guy who is happy with life. He was born in San Jose, attended public schools, and never even considered the priesthood until he was 18. "I was in the youth group at church and they had a priest come in and talk to the boys, a nun come in and talk to the girls," he says. "And it created a question that never went away." He attended Santa Clara University, where the question became more pronounced when he was introduced to the Jesuit community and its an emphasis on "finding God in all things." He says: "Even though the Jesuits are best-known for spirituality and education, there are doctors who are Jesuits, lawyers. I felt I wouldn't be boxed in, that the Jesuits would look at my gifts—or rather the gifts God gave me—and put them to their best use." He took his vows as a Jesuit novitiate in 1983 and, 20 years later, seems extremely satisfied with the path he chose. "I was at Supercuts—you know, you always play 20 Questions when you get your hair cut," he says. "And someone asked me, 'What about all the things you give up?' and I was just silent for a moment. It had been so long since I thought of my life as being about giving something up."

He is, in fact, serene as he approaches middle age. "Someone asked me recently about growing older," he said, "and I thought, what would I change? I only get 80 years here, I'm only in the middle of it, and I'm loving it. I have great friends and family, I have my health, and I'm settled in a ministry. I'm engaged in something that gives my life great purpose."

God apparently saw fit to assign him to a river town, because Bonfiglio likes to row. "I rowed at Santa Clara and kind of assumed that was all there was to rowing," he says. But after watching some of his students in a regatta three years ago, he was "bit" again. He's now a member of the River City Rowing Club, which practices in the Port of Sacramento, and will compete in the USRowing Masters National Championship this August at Lake Natoma. "I like being competitive," he says with another grin, "and I like the people I row with—it's a very diverse group. But I also like that there are no expectations of me—as a priest, as an administrator. I'm just Greg Bonfiglio."

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