Rev. Jim O’Brien: 80 years dedicated to serving others

Rev. Jim O’Brien spent his 80th birthday just how you’d imagine – serving with the Sisters at the Big Laurel Learning Center in Southern West Virginia.

But, this year, something was different on the mountain … the annual spring trip started out the same as every other year – loading up the car for the Holy Thursday drive south. However, when Fr. O’Brien arrived, he found himself surrounded by a large contingent of alumni. They made the trip to serve at the Center and celebrate O’Brien’s milestone.

Lydia (Wanless) D’Anna ’91 said organizing the alumni service trip “seemed like the right thing to do.” When she began reaching out to other WJU alums to encourage them to participate, the response was amazing. Alumni from all over the country returned to the Center at the urging of D’Anna and her husband Neil ’91, and Vin ’01 and Nancy (Matteuzzi) Bruni ’01 to honor their mentor with a surprise birthday gathering. They traveled from Ohio, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Kentucky, Maryland, North Carolina, the District of Columbia and Louisiana. As each one arrived, Fr. O’Brien stood in disbelief.

When the dust had settled and all had arrived, the list of alumni included: the D’Annas; P.J. Reindel ’02 and Kelly (Swan) Reindel ’04; Jenny Poland ’01; the Brunis; Jason ’01 and Becca (Heinz) Dickson ’01; Dan Peterson; Jeff Post ’02; Alyssa (Pasternak) Post ’02; Jana (Lundgren) Pedowitz ’01 and her husband Aaron; Becky Reindel ’04; Zack Conron ’02; Beth Chambers ’92; Kelly (Found) ’02 and Jacob Caddy ’02; and Tony Mazza ’06.

Fr. O’Brien had no idea that many alumni would be at Big Laurel for the weekend. “I was expecting six or seven.”

The humble Philadelphia native said it’s been an “interesting and privileged” time. “I’ve been here 45 years and I often said maybe they lost my folder over in Baltimore! But, I’m not going to tell them. This is a good place to be.”

In looking back on his service to Wheeling Jesuit University and its many students, Fr. O’Brien said simply, “It’s all about the people.”

The annual service trip, he noted, is a true example of service integration and being a part of the experience “makes them feel at home—connected to the place and each other.”

And, they also feel connected to him.

Yes, they went to serve, but also to be with the man who has been their teacher and mentor.

“St. Ignatius taught us love is an exchange of gifts. Fr. O’Brien loved us and we went on this trip as a way of sharing our love and gifts with him—honoring him by being with him to celebrate,” D’Anna added.

Vin Bruni said, “Fr. O’Brien helped me see that grace is real, that Christ’s presence is tangible, and that a commitment to Christianity brings that reality to life in everyday interactions. Fr. O’Brien showed me that love and gratitude are things lived, not just spoken.”

His wife Nancy added, “He has been such a gift in the lives of so many, yet he is humble and filled with gratitude each time he encounters a familiar face. He is able to see the beauty in the ordinary and the greatness in each of us, thus encouraging us to live up to the person he knows we can be.”
O’Brien’s been a constant influence and inspiration in the life of Chambers. “I feel blessed to know him and to be someone who has been touched by him. There is no way to fully thank him for all he has done for me except to try to emulate him in how I choose to live my life.”

“I see O’B as the gold standard for how I should live my life and he inspires me to work to be a person for others and to try to learn something from every person and every experience,” Chambers added.

Like many others, Chambers lives by the mantra that Fr. O’Brien has been teaching for more than four decades – don’t let your studies get in the way of your education. She said he always has told students and alumni that you learn a lot more from experiencing life and the world than you can from just reading about it in a book.

Kelly Caddy added that Fr. O’Brien has a way of teaching that leads the student to dive more deeply into the subject, often causing more questions than originally sought.

“Fr. O’Brien would answer my question in a way that lead me to dig deeper, into myself and into the heart of the issue, to seek answers. This has lead me to fully appreciate and pay attention to where I get my information from, the value of the information source, and the very value of discerning options before I act on an issue. He is a true teacher,” Caddy noted.

“He’s the greatest teacher and mentor—he gives students the chance to grow and shape their mind and their hearts,” D’Anna said. The trips, she said, are a way for students and alumni to grow and learn about themselves.

Want to honor Fr. O’Brien?

You can honor Fr. James O’Brien, S.J. on the occasion of his 80th birthday by making a gift to the James A. O’Brien, S.J., Ph.D. Scholarship. Established in 2003, the O’Brien scholarship is awarded to an upper class student from West Virginia who is committed to community service. Preference is given to a student serving at the Mother Jones House, but is not limited to just those students.

If you wish to make a gift to the O’Brien scholarship, contact the Advancement Office at 304-243-2296 or 1-800-888-2586. You also can make your gift online at www.wju.edu/alumni and designate your gift to the O’Brien Scholarship.