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## A New Model for Education?

**T**im Dernian was working toward a doctorate in education when a professor told his cohort, “We all know the system is broken. Stop talking about fixing it.” The implication was clear: The public school system is beyond repair. It’s time for a new one. Go forth and create it.

So I’m thinking back well over 25 years ago, when then-Gov. Mike Castle launched a public school reform program titled Delaware 2000. Since then, several local and federal reforms have come and many have gone: New Directions, Delaware Comprehensive Assessment System, No Child Left Behind, Vision 2012, Vision 2015 and, now, Race to the Top, the Common Core Curriculum and Vision 2020. How many times do we have to do this?

I have to wonder if members of the Vision 2020 committee missed the irony of its new name, because if hindsight is perfectly clear, it is obvious our reforms have failed. And despite the great boon that was Race to the Top funding—\$119 million—it seems we’re blind to some obvious successes.

As you’ll see in “From Tiny Acorns” (page 56), Dernian’s Tall Oaks Classical School has hit upon something special—the so-called “trivium” of education born in Hellenic Greece. In a word, students are taught in a way that is most appropriate for their stage of psychological development. By leading them through the grammar, logic and rhetoric stages in language, the arts and humanities, math and science, Tall Oaks students encounter ideas that many others never hear about until they reach college. One result is that, a couple years ago, Tall Oaks scored the second-highest SAT scores in the state.

It’s hard to argue with that kind of success. So why don’t our policy makers look more closely at what happens there?

Tall Oaks is, in many ways, the antithesis of a traditional public school. Classes are small. Standards are high, students and teachers are expected to meet them, and there are strict penalties for failing to do so. The school is governed directly by its board and teachers are given great latitude in shaping the curriculum. Students are not taught to pass a test, but how to learn and how to think, which is far more liberating and empowering. And all of this happens at a cost of about \$7,500 per student.

A traditional public school is characterized by large classes. Students and teachers are subject to the reform du jour. The schools are governed by a large, expensive



Rob Martinelli

administration. And academic performance, as measured by whatever test happens to be the standard of the moment, is still mediocre, despite average per-student spending of \$14,700 in the same 2012-2013 school year that Tall Oaks rocked the SATs.

Is it a strictly fair comparison? Tall Oaks has no transportation costs. Tall Oaks does manage to keep its class size small. Tall Oaks doesn’t have to accept everyone who comes its way.

Tall Oaks still accepts students of all abilities. Its high minority population has closed the performance gap. And Tall Oaks seems to be better than the public schools at identifying and educating students with special needs. Those SAT scores are all the proof that should be needed. The classical model is so successful, Don Post recently left his position as Tall Oaks’ headmaster to run a similar school in Ghana, where the government is exploring it as the national model.

Classical education was the model of public American education until 125 years ago. I can’t help thinking that a return to some of its fundamentals—coupled with real local control, a right-sizing of state-level administration and help for those who want to send their child to any school they want, public or private—would be the greatest reforms we could make. Because for all our big talk of being unable to compete in a global marketplace, the real victims of a substandard school system are not our economy and our national pride, but our children.

*Robert Martinelli*



The title 'FROM Tiny Acorns' is presented with 'FROM' in white text on a brown leaf, 'Tiny' in brown twigs, and 'Acorns' in brown twigs. The background features faint, repeating text from the article.

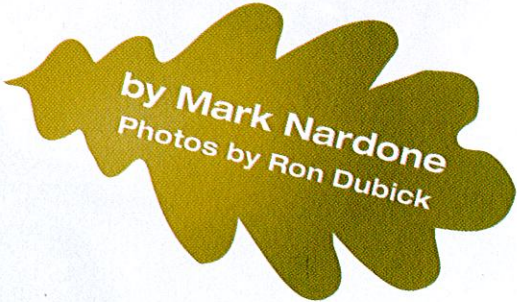
# FROM Tiny Acorns



## **SOMETHING SPECIAL IS HAPPENING AT TALL OAKS CLASSICAL SCHOOL.**

A radical new model of education—2,500 years old—is making a comeback and producing some of the best high school students in the state.

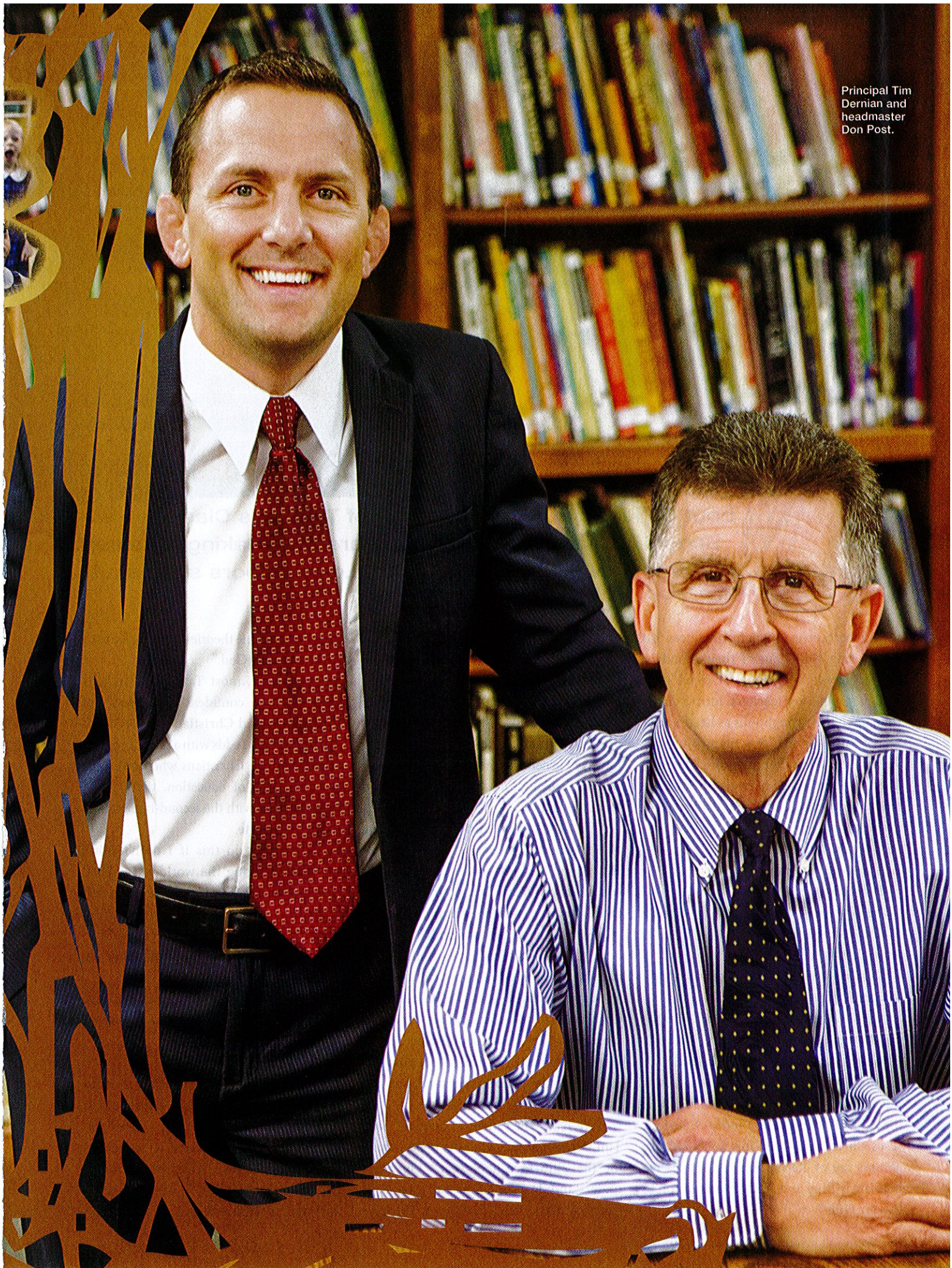
And if they say their prayers, they might change the world a little, too.

A green leaf-shaped graphic containing the author and photographer credits.

by Mark Nardone  
Photos by Ron Dubick



Principal Tim  
Dernian and  
headmaster  
Don Post.







Upper class  
with morning prayer  
and singing.

about 50 kids gather in a hallway of Tall Oaks Classical School to start their day. Some are still shaking off sleep. Some are laughing and joking. Locker doors slam shut.

Teacher Stephen Rippon announces that they'll sing No. 7 out of their hymnals, "O the Deep, Deep Love of Jesus." The students, and a few teachers, form a circle, then open their songbooks as headmaster Don Post leans in. "Not many churches sing out of the psalter anymore," he says. Then Rippon plays a chord on an electronic keyboard, and the students lift their voices.

*O the deep, deep love of Jesus,  
vast, unmeasured, boundless, free!*

*Rolling as a mighty ocean in its  
fullness over me!*

*Underneath me, all around me,  
is the current of Thy love*

*Leading onward, leading homeward to  
Thy glorious rest above!*

Rippon then asks question No. 1 of the Heidelberg Catechism: What is your only comfort in life and death? The kids answer solemnly as one: "That I am not my own, but belong with body and soul, both in life and in death, to my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ ... by His Holy Spirit He also assures me of eternal life and makes me heartily willing and ready from now on to live for Him."

And so the school day, one of the last of the year, begins. The children, in blue button-down shirts and sweater vests, rush off to their classes: to literature or comp, history or world culture, to algebra or precalculus, Latin or Greek, to drama or music, to general science or bio or chem, to Biblical theology, to aesthetics or apologetics or hermeneutics.

"Classical" is prominent in the name of Tall Oaks. It describes a method of education that was the standard of compulsory public education in the United States until the late 19th century. The word "Christian" is absent from the name, but grounding the curriculum and lesson plans in the Bible is as important—more so—as the teaching method. Both set Tall Oaks apart from public schools, as well as from other Christian schools, sometimes in ways that other Christian school communities not only do not understand, but also consider subversive to their faith.

"We read 'The Origin of Species,'" says Tim Dernian, principal of the upper school for the 2013-14 school year. "Our kids understand Darwin. You can't read all Christian texts. That's dangerous. You have

to understand the theories people have used to explain away God."

As a result, most Tall Oaks students graduate as confident defenders of Christianity and Christian values. And if that puts them at odds with a secular society, as well as those Christians who don't quite get their style of education, that's OK—they also leave with the second-highest SAT scores in the state.

"I wouldn't do this if I didn't think we were changing the world," says Post. He chuckles. "That's why I'm glad we're still under the radar of the government. We're not even a blip. When they catch on to classical Christian education, they won't be able to stop it."

Now, after 20 years on the leading edge of the movement, Post is going farther off the radar.

Don Post grew up attending Sunday services in the Southern Presbyterian Church, but stopped when he started college at Virginia Tech. "To me, it just seemed like a club," he says. After graduation in 1970, he trained in the U.S. Army Reserves, then went to work as a civil engineer, help-



ing to build highways. Something gnawed at him. He went to church one Sunday. Then he went back.

"Hearing the word, I became aware of my own need," Post says. "I got involved with a lot of things real quick."

In 1979, he entered Reformed Theological Seminary in Jackson, Miss. He was ordained a Presbyterian minister, then led a church in South Carolina before starting another in Huntington, W. Va. After 10 years as pastor, the church dismissed him after a divorce from his first wife. Still, "the Lord provided in all sorts of ways."

He found a job at a hospital, then entered a graduate program at Marshall University. After only 18 months, he earned a master's degree in education. About that time, he started dating his wife-to-be. He took a new job teaching math, then he and Barbara married. About a year later, when a friend asked for help starting a new school, he began work on The Geneva School, a classical

Christian school near Orlando, Fla. It opened in 1995, then enrolled more students in its first six years than Tall Oaks has now at 20. Post believed the school was quickly losing sight of its mission and said so, which lost him favor with the board. He was voted out, even by the friend who helped bring him on.

As Geneva was launching, Dave Williams and his wife were schooling their seven children at home in Elkton. The couple had sent a few of the kids to a Christian school, "but it was really nothing more than a public-school education with a religion class," Williams says, so they pulled them out. Yet the demands of teaching the eldest precalculus while teaching the youngest to read were getting too difficult to manage.

Through their church, the Williamses hosted the Rev. Douglas Wilson at their home during a visit to the University of Delaware. Wilson was a towering figure

in the nascent classical Christian education movement, having written "Recovering the Lost Tools of Learning." The book, published in 1991, was a critique of public education

and guide to spiritual learning, based on his experience at the Logos classical Christian school he and other home-schooling parents founded in Moscow, Idaho, 10 years earlier.

The Logos founders were inspired in part by a 1940s essay by British fiction writer-literary critic Dorothy Sayers, "The Lost Tools of Learning," which expounded the philosophy of classical education. Originating in the day of Aristotle, it educates young people at their most appropriate developmental stages. Grammar—or the rules of language, culture, math and science—is emphasized through age 12, when they are most receptive to absorbing facts and figures. Grammar is followed by logic, or instruction in the relationship of things, in the middle school years, when students begin to challenge the facts, authority and each other. With a solid education in logic, students then study rhetoric, or a clear expression of grammar, logic and self, in the teen years.

The trivium, as it is known, became the model of education in the West for centuries. The Logos founders simply revived its methods while reintroducing the Bible, which had started a long fall from American education in the 1880s. With a record number of students consistently scoring in the top 20 percent *continued on page 89*

Barbara Post with her kindergarten class.





continued from page 59

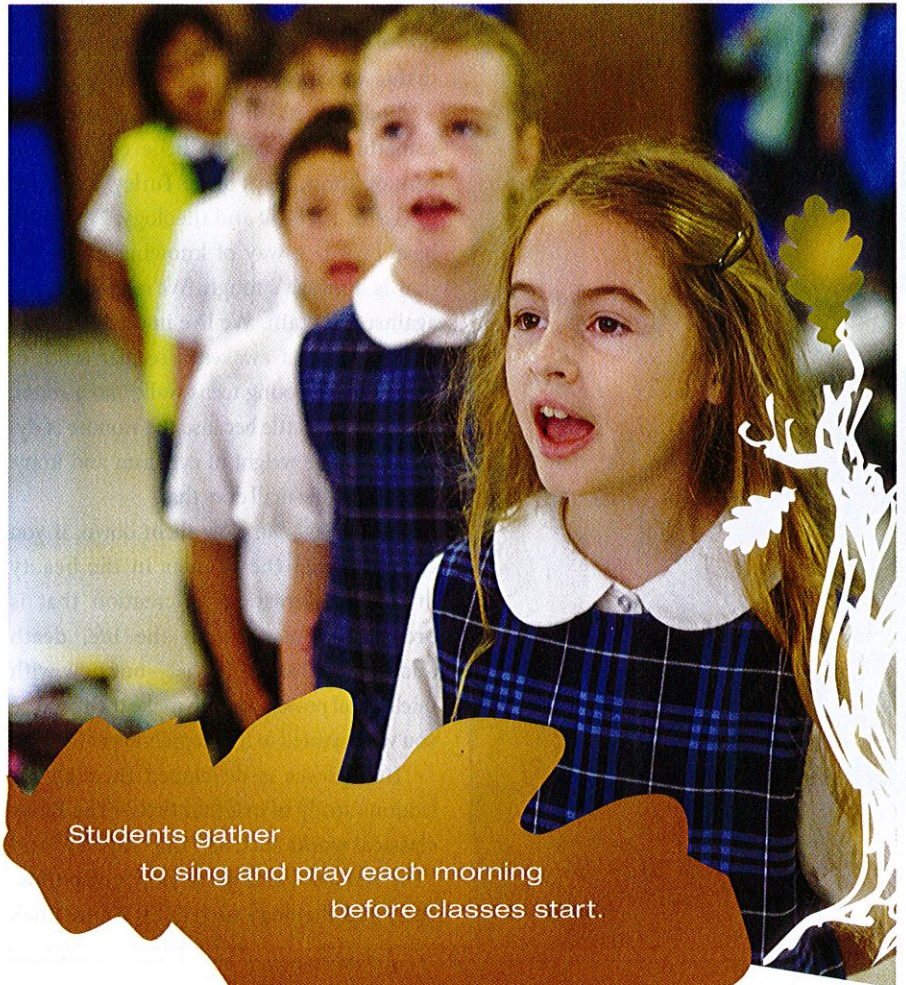
on standardized tests, Logos and Wilson were in a unique position to spread the word. After Wilson's book was published, interest in classical Christian education became so great, Logos established the Association of Classical Christian Schools to answer questions and to help other schools get started.

When Wilson visited the university to take part in a debate about education, he was impressed by the number of home-schooling families in the Williamses' circle. He suggested they start their own school. Williams read Wilson's book, and it struck a chord. A handful of families, his among them, launched Christ Classical Christian School in Elkton in 1994. It boasted 23 students, one teacher, one administrator and an annual operating budget of \$25,000. It changed names to Tall Oaks a few years later.

Also in 1994, the ACCS held its first national conference in Moscow. There were 46 member schools at the time. Post was among 70 people to attend. He was elected to the board permanently in 2000. Soon after leaving Geneva, a fellow board member alerted him to a job opening at Tall Oaks. He became, in 2001, the school's second headmaster, and Barbara joined the faculty as a kindergarten teacher.

Under Post, with Williams as the school board's president, enrollment has increased to 210 students in grades kindergarten through 12. He has shepherded the school through several moves. (Its current home at First Baptist Church of Delaware in New Castle is its fifth.) The budget has increased to \$1.5 million. The faculty has grown to include more teachers with advanced degrees per capita than any other school in the state, and the student body has become the most racially and ethnically diverse. Of the 246 ACCS member schools in the country today, Tall Oaks is one of only 30 to earn accreditation by the association—"That's kind of a prize category," says executive director Patch Blakey—and it has won the ACCS's top academic award for the past four years.

Then there are those SAT scores. In the 2011-12 school year, Tall Oaks (1905 combined) was surpassed only by the St. Andrew's boarding school (1948). The rest of the top five, in order, were Delaware's top public school, Char-



Students gather to sing and pray each morning before classes start.

ter School of Wilmington (1892), followed by the private Archmere Academy, a Roman Catholic school (1876), and Tower Hill (1863).

What's more, students receive their education at a bargain price. For 2012-13, day schools like Archmere and Tower Hill cost, on average, \$21,825 and \$25,675, respectively. Students attended Tall Oaks for about a third as much—\$7,890.

Still, Post judges the school by other standards.

"We measure our success by how we change the lives of the people who are going out into the world to change the culture."

"We want the kids to excel in any field," says Tim Dernian. "When you lead, you have to know what you believe, and you have to have the confidence and fortitude to say it. Leadership in their families, leadership in their churches—that's the foundation of society. So it's important for us to form the whole person. It helps form the

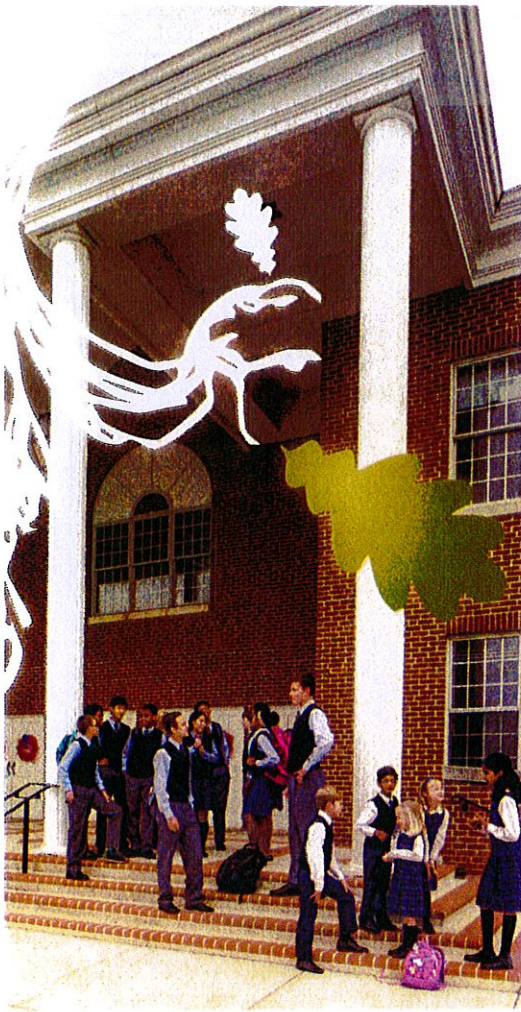
school environment."

The dissertation that earned Dernian a doctorate in education from Ashland University measured the strength of Christian faith among students in modern Christian schools and those who attend classical Christian schools. The members of the defense committee were suspect of Dernian's thesis. Two professors, he says, remained professional and questioned him mainly about instructional methods and techniques. One was openly hostile.

"I think they believed I was saying that classical education leads to faith. It doesn't," Dernian says. "There *is* something special about classical education, but you can't do it without truth."

Among other things a classical education does, it gives one's faith an undeniable intellectual force. The knowledge and skills developed would serve anyone well, regardless of worldview or religious affiliation. But at Tall Oaks and other ACCS schools, all





learning is directed toward the glorification of God and the living of Christian values in this world.

“Religion has been redefined today as something that can be believed, but you cannot know,” says Steve Turley, a teacher of Greek, rhetoric and theology. “What we have here is a way of knowing the world that is a gift. It’s tough. We’re really going against the grain. We live in an age of secular rituals that awaken a secular sense of life. So when young teens walk into a room, I know it’s a battle because the wonder is dying under the weight of cynicism and irony. One trip to the mall does that.

“But if you can slow them down, if you can reawaken the wonder in the beauty of the new creation—a creation that is brought about through the life, death and resurrection of Christ—but now with intellectual power, you can make them realize you were created to live happily ever after.”

That power is developed through assiduous study of original texts—the Bible, classical works such as “The Odyssey” and “The Aeneid,” and great works of philosophy and theology such as St. Augustine’s

“City of God”—as well as great English literature, music and the other arts and humanities at the core of any modern liberal-arts program in any university, including “The Origin of Species.”

If ever there was an idea that inflamed debate about religion and education, Darwin’s theory of evolution is it, and though the furor over teaching the idea in public schools has cooled since the so-called Scopes Monkey Trial of 1925, “Origin” remains a recurring spark in the debate about the content of public education and points of theology—even among Christians.

Which is exactly why Tall Oaks students read it.

“God created unity in all through Christ, so education must be unified,” Dernian says “It’s exciting. It brings life to life”—both the living of it and the biological fact of it. “So we read Darwin. We don’t want to withdraw from the world. We want to engage. It helps us understand society better. We want to understand in the right way.”

So teaching students how to learn, according to Dernian and Post, is as important as what they learn.

## TALL OAKS CLASSICAL SCHOOL

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Which raises a question: If one is trained to explore with all his intellectual power and with great academic rigor if only to find the "right" answers to the big philosophical questions in the Bible, is he being trained to think at all?

"Sometimes it's not the content, but what you do with it," says Dan Hickey, head of Tower Hill's upper school. When teachers there gave juniors and seniors greater access to contemporary literature, "The quality of the interaction between students and teachers, the quality of the writing and the quality of the thinking all went up. There are so many different schools for so many different reasons. You can use all sorts of texts and still get kids to the same place. It's about making meaning for them."

Karl Mason did his junior and senior years of high school at Tall Oaks after moving from another classical Christian school near his home in Havertown, Pa. It prepared him well, he says, to further his studies in literature and to contribute to discussions of the grand philosophical questions at Villanova University. Though he chose to study at a Catholic school, he already felt an affinity for many of the points of view he encountered at Tall Oaks. Its catechism may be in line with the Westminster Confession of Faith, he says, but there is a respect for other Christian ideas. He points out that one of the school's theology teachers comes from the Greek Orthodox tradition.

Mason later earned a master's at Durham University in northern England, then returned to Tall Oaks to teach literature in 2010.

"I was drawn by the freedom of the faculty," Mason says. "I had a great chance to teach what I've learned about great works of literature. And the kids are just so responsive, so eager to learn."

It's a point echoed by top students.

"The beauty of this place is realizing that it's a gift of which you are not worthy," says Joshua Franck. "It helped form me as a person instead of just inform me intellectually."

Franck attended Tall Oaks from kindergarten through graduation in May. He loves to read "anything and everything"—especially fiction. "It's easy to get emotionally and intellectually involved with

the characters," he says. "It can lead you to a different consciousness of yourself." ("Crime and Punishment" was tops on his personal summer book list.)

This month he leaves for New Saint Andrews College in Moscow, Idaho, a school that sprang directly from the classical Christian education movement. Many of Tall Oaks' alumni have attended the school, including all of the Williamses' children. Of the seven, six have remained in Moscow.

Franck was drawn to New Saint Andrews through his interest in the liberal arts and his fascination with the classical model. "My education flowed perfectly from grade to grade," he says. "It helped form my mind in ways I couldn't have found elsewhere."

Jaime Weber has attended Tall Oaks with Franck since kindergarten. She departs soon for Mississippi College, where she will study interior design and business. She has "loved the nurturing atmosphere of Tall Oaks," and says it has prepared her to encounter ideas that are different from her own, which has happened often with the University of Delaware students at the coffee shop in Newark where she works. As Dernian's dissertation showed, classical Christian education has only deepened her faith.

"People know I'm a Christian and they respect that, though some will say, 'It's just not for me,'" Weber says. "One co-worker came from a similar background and rejected it. I questioned it. Studying apologetics helped me understand why they believe what they do. They respect that."

To be sure, Tall Oaks and schools like it are not for everyone. "Some will thrive here. Some won't," Franck says. Mastering the curriculum takes hard work, and the whole of Christianity is not always willing to accept it. Dernian points out that although most students leave the school with a strong understanding of and commitment to their faith, some will not. "We expect that," he says. "We are all sinners."

"They don't all leave the way we meant them to leave," Post says, "but this has affected them."

May was a busy time for the Posts. Don preached a final sermon at his church, and the congregation gave him and Barbara a party. The Tall Oaks family put on a big presentation in their honor. Don began

emptying his office while Barbara shipped off materials from her classroom. They continued to work on their fundraising while preparing to vacate their home. He wrapped up a year of grooming Dernian to take over as headmaster this year.

At 66, he decided it was time to move on. So after a good deal of thought and prayer, he and Barbara decided to go to Ghana as part of the Rafiki Foundation. They were set to leave in late July.

Rafiki's mission is "to befriend orphans and widows in their distress" (James 1:27), which it does, in part, through educating children. It has established a series of villages in 10 African countries where the children live and go to school and the women are trained in various skills. With the Ghanaian government's recent decision to establish classical Christian education in its schools, Post will spend the next two years creating a model school.

"These kids never had anyone to care for them or love them," Post says. "That's where the love of Christ transforms them. Christ really is at the center of this."

The Rafiki mission aligns perfectly with Post's experience in education and his leadership in the ACCS, says Patch Blakey of the ACCS. Blakey visited Post's new school as part of a two-week mission in Ghana in March, yet the couple goes there sight unseen. Blakey notes that Post will be the first head of an ACCS-accredited school to work long-term in Africa. The ACCS counts seven schools abroad among its number. "We hope to see that number grow," Blakey says. "Don and Barbara will help. We're very interested in spreading the classical Christian education model throughout the world."

"I'm excited Don is doing this," says Williams. "To watch the movement grow in this country alone is exciting."

Despite all the excitement, high hopes and expectations, Don Post seems nonchalant. He leaves for his village sight unseen, and at considerable expense. Rafiki volunteers raise their own funds for the mission. The Posts must meet a goal of about \$250,000 over the next two years.

"I don't worry too much," Post says. "You work and work, and if people see what you do, they give. We'll get there."

"We've got to change this culture." □