

# MidWeek.com

## MidWeek's Cover Story

April 2, 2003

### The Miracle Worker at Chaminade



*By Mark Doyle*

Miracles are curious things. Some ascribe them to divine intervention. Others don't believe in them at all. Many argue that if and when they do occur, it's usually because someone has stepped up in the face of formidable odds and done something extraordinary to achieve unlikely results. They call this the hero theory.

Miracles or heroes? At Chaminade University, they're one in the same. Indeed, the institution has a long history of philanthropy, social contribution, generous alumni and individual sacrifice. But behind



each of these triumphs stands a legacy of heroics. Three in particular appear to stand above the rest.

First there was Father William Joseph Chaminade, the Catholic priest who survived the French Revolution's bloody "Reign of Terror" and returned from Spain to rebuild the Church of France. If it weren't for this bold clergyman, Honolulu's only

Catholic university would have never existed.

Then, who can forget Coach Merv Lopes and the 1982 Chaminade basketball team? They just celebrated the 20th anniversary of their astonishing 77-72 victory over Ralph Sampson and No. 1 ranked Virginia. This David and Goliath shocker still ranks as one of the biggest upsets in collegiate sports history.

In 1995, another hero came along. Her name is Dr. Mary Cville Wesselkamper. Everyone on campus calls her "Sue." Fresh off the plane from New York, she assumed the title and duties as the eighth president of the small university. She's not only the first woman ever to hold this post at Chaminade, she's the first woman to preside over any university in Hawaii and one of the first women to become president of a Catholic university in the nation.

Still, she'd taken on a daunting task. Together, Wesselkamper and Chaminade faced an adversary much more intimidating than a dominating 7-foot 4-inch, All-American basketball player.

Instead of a game buzzer, they were hearing the death chimes of impending financial ruin. Enrollment had reached a record low; financial gifts had shrunk to obligatory charity levels; the school's once beautiful campus had noticeably deteriorated; programs had begun to disappear as faculty and staff members looked for a way out.

Pressed as to why the university suddenly found itself on the ropes, Wesselkamper shrugs and says there was no single reason, sidestepping questions about her predecessor, Kent Keith.

"We're a small school. We depend on gifts and grants to a degree, but our enrollment has always been our primary source of revenue," she explains. "Things started getting bad in the early '90s, and they reached a critical point in 1995.

"We normally enroll between 1,100 and 1,300 day undergraduates. By 1995, our enrollment had dropped to below 600.

"The university was never properly financed. It always had generous donors, but it never had real financial support from the outside."

Not until she arrived, that is.

"After working here for several months, I realized we had very rich Marianist traditions," she recalls. "I realized that is who we are, and we weren't taking advantage of it."

Chaminade is sponsored by the Pacific region of the Society of Mary (Marianists). The origin of the society dates back to the political turmoil and religious persecution of the French Revolution. Today, it's an international organization, with its U.S. "Province" primarily marshaled at the University of Dayton in Ohio.



“The Marianists were the first to step forward,” Wesselkamper says.

“They gave us \$4.2 million. That did three things: First, it took away our operating debt (she says Chaminade was paying out \$350,000 a year on its debt alone).

Second, it gave us \$500,000 for faculty severance packages. Some of our faculty was getting on in years, and this was what they were waiting for.

“Third, it signaled to us that the Marianists were behind us. They were willing to support this university.”

This support had a mushroom effect. The following year, the school received a \$250,000 grant from the Clarence T.C. Ching Foundation. Other donors and alumni have since increased their gifts as well. Since 1999, Chaminade has received more than \$6 million in gifts, including a recent \$1 million gift from an anonymous donor.

Enrollment has increased 65 percent over the last seven years, climbing back up to where it was before the school’s fiscal nosedive. Currently there are 1,030 traditional day students (undergraduates) enrolled full time, 389 of whom live in four residence halls on campus, and 557 graduate students and adult students enrolled in accelerated evening programs offered at nine sites on Oahu and via distance learning.

In addition to their generous gift in 1996, the Marianists at the University of Dayton also sent a computer and admissions consultant to Chaminade to help it install an integrated computer data system. Along with increased enrollment, the reborn, high-tech university

began beefing up its curriculum profile as well. With 70 full-time faculty, 300 adjunct professors and 130 staff, it now offers three bachelor's degrees in 22 undergraduate majors, five graduate degree programs and several professional certificate programs.

To say that the Marianists simply “stepped forward” to help Chaminade doesn't tell the whole story. Wesselkamper, a humble, soft-spoken woman of Italian-Irish descent, immediately dodges any discussion pointing credit in her direction.

“We didn't have an integrated computer system (in 1995), but what we did have was a very committed faculty,” she says. “This was a team effort. Everyone wants to talk about me, but there are a lot of people who sacrificed and worked just as hard as I did to make this happen.”

That may be true, but the school might never have survived, much less flourished, without Wesselkamper on the scene.

Before coming to Chaminade, Wesselkamper was dean of the School of Arts and Sciences and associate professor of social work at the College of New Rochelle in New York state. Before that, she held faculty positions at Radford University, where she also served as director of the Social Work Field Instruction program, and at New River Community College, where she headed the Community and Social Services Program.

Wesselkamper had the credentials, but she also had the contacts. Born and raised in Athens, Ohio, she came to know the powerbrokers among the Marianist brotherhood.

“On my way to take the job at Chaminade, I stopped off to talk to the president of the University of Dayton, Brother Ray Fitz,”

Wesselkamper recalls. “He knew I was heading to Hawaii and said, ‘Sue, I’ve heard things are pretty bad at Chaminade.’

“Well, I’m going to do what I can,’ I told him.

“He said, ‘If there’s anything I can do to help, let me know.’

“So I moved to Hawaii and after six weeks on the job, I called Brother Fitz on the phone and said, ‘Remember when you said if I needed help to call you?’”

Within months, Wesselkamper had that \$4.2 million on her desk. Chaminade continues receive generous support from the Marianists. Why, after so many years, did the Marianists decide to help a small, failing university in the middle of the Pacific?

Wesselkamper, who holds a doctorate in social welfare from the Graduate Center at New York University and a master’s in social work from the University of Michigan, also earned undergraduate degrees in history and government. She insists that to understand the Marianists, it helps to know something about them.

“During the Reign of Terror, the Catholic Church was abolished in France because it was so closely aligned with the monarchy,” she begins. “Father Chaminade escaped to Spain, but he later returned to France and decided the best way to rebuild the church was to secretly engage the laity in villages in the countryside. Instead of openly practicing their religious traditions, they concentrated on education and providing service to their communities...”

It’s probably wise never to ask an academician where it all began. To make a long story short, Father Chaminade worked for the next 20 years in these French communities. He founded the Daughters of

Mary in 1816 and a year later founded the Society of Mary, a community of priests and laity who called themselves “the brothers.”

It was during this difficult period that the brothers recognized that education provided the means for passing on their vision of Christianity to future generations. At the same time, it provided them with a means for intellectual pursuit, with a strong emphasis on the liberal arts.

In 1849, members of the Society of Mary came to the United States to minister to immigrant populations. As an outgrowth of their ministry, they founded what grew to be the University of Dayton and, shortly thereafter, what became St. Mary’s University in San Antonio, Texas.

In 1883, eight Marianists arrived in Honolulu and assumed the leadership of what is now Saint Louis School. After many years of management, they decided to establish a Catholic college. Saint Louis Junior College opened in 1955 under Father Robert Mackey. In 1957, when the college became a four-year coeducational institution, the name was changed to Chaminade College. After graduate programs were added in 1977, the name was changed to Chaminade University of Honolulu.



Though she has been in Hawaii only eight years, no one is more proud of Chaminade’s comeback than Wesselkamper. Eager to give tours of the university’s newly landscaped campus, she starts in the lobby of Freitas Hall, the administration building, for a look at an architectural model of the school’s 70-acre

campus, which it shares with St. Louis School.

“See, this is where we’re going to build the new student center,” she says excitedly. “And right there is where we’re building a new residential hall for the brothers. Right now they’re in this building over here.”

There are 16 Marianist brothers residing at Chaminade, occupying both faculty and administrative positions. Most, Wesselkamper says, wear more than one hat on campus.

“Come on, let’s get the cart,” she says, anxious to tour the real thing. And so we’re off in her golf cart. The first stop is Hale Hoaloha, the oldest of four residential halls on the property. “This building was built in the ’60s,” she says. “See how the dorm rooms open up to an outside walkway. Today that presents a security problem so we added a gate and bars on the ground floor over there.”

Located a block off Waialae Avenue in Kaimuki, the campus rises up the slope of Kalaepohaku, with sensational views of the ocean, Diamond Head and Waikiki.

Around the side of the residence hall is a large recreation room. A huge wide-screen television sits in one corner, with comfortable chairs and sofas not far away. The room also features a full kitchen for parties, a pool table, ping pong table, Foosball table and separate classrooms for study. Outside there’s an immaculate sand volleyball court.

Wesselkamper doesn’t tarry long at the hall and strides quickly back to the cart, ready to move on. It’s hard to ignore how fast she walks. At 61, this working mother of two grown children doesn’t look as if she could move that fast, but she does. In fact, she walks for exercise every morning up the hill near her home on Waialae Iki, where she

and husband Tom live.

For the next three hours, Wesselkamper stops at almost every building on campus, hopping out and racewalking up and down the hallways knocking on doors. It's already after 6 p.m. and most of the staff have left for the day. Nonetheless, she grabs and introduces any faculty member she can find, determined to share the spotlight with them.

After the Behavior Sciences building, she runs into the Education building, locating a professor who runs the university's graduate program in education. "Chaminade graduates the second-highest number of teachers in the state," the professor states proudly.

Down the hall, Wesselkamper introduces a young woman named Nanette Schonleber, a professor of education and director of the school's Montessori Teacher Education Department, the only Montessori teacher preparatory program in Hawaii.

"We've been very successful with our outreach program," Schonleber explains when asked to provide a quick overview of her department. "We go out and provide training for Montessori preschool teachers in their communities, places where preschool teachers are unlikely to get formal training. The program is already working well on the Big Island, and now we're developing one in Waianae."

One building Wesselkamper doesn't stop at is the Athletics building, a tiny wooden building known as The Shack that was once a Army barracks during World War II. Chaminade participates in the NCAA Division II's Pacific West Conference and supports athletic teams in men's basketball, women's volleyball, men's water polo, women's softball, men's and women's tennis, men's and women's cross country

and, beginning this year, men's and women's golf.

Although it has never come close to achieving a victory on the court like it enjoyed against Virginia in 1982, men's basketball is still the marquee sport on campus. Chaminade continues to host the Maui Invitational, one of the most prestigious nationally televised college basketball tournaments in the country. Even Ralph Sampson attended the tournament last November to help celebrate the 20th anniversary of the Chaminade-Virginia game.

"We invited him," Wesselkamper says. "We held a press conference and he was here signing autographs. Only a very gracious person would do something like that."

As emotional and entertaining as they are, athletics clearly comes second to academics at Chaminade. "We have very strong academic programs," Wesselkamper states. "We have about a 16-to-1 ratio in the classroom so our students get more individualized attention than at larger universities.

"We're also affordable (\$12,950 annual undergraduate tuition; \$385 per credit hour for graduate programs), and we have very aggressive financial aid programs. We'll give you a \$3,000 grant if you graduated from any high school or community college in Hawaii."

According to Brother Bernard J. Ploeger, Ph.D., executive vice president and provost of Chaminade, the money donated by the Marianists in 1995 was critical to salvaging the university. But, he adds, equally important was that Chaminade needed to clarify who they are in a competitive market.

[...]

Wesselkamper agrees. “We have a culturally diverse learning environment here that stresses the development of the whole person,” she explains, adding that in the Marianist tradition, the university strongly emphasizes the development of an active social conscience.

“We prepare our students with a top quality education and the skills they need to get a good job, but we also prepare them for life.”