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A smiling Principal Randy Hodge fist bumps with his youngest Shamrocks as he greets them on a wintry Friday morning at St. Patrick Catholic School in Portland.

Hodge, in his second year as principal, doesn't miss much amid the moving sea of hunter green-clad students on this non-uniform school spirit day.

"Where's your cast?" he asks a youngster who until today has had to cool her heels in the office during recess. "How's your mom?" he asks another student.

A beaming nephew, Alex, a sixth grader, gets a hearty welcome back after being out because of medical issues. A colorfully decorated sheet cake awaits him in his classroom.

Hodge, 41, knows this place inside and out. He graduated from here, as did his four siblings, his parents and grandparents. Currently he has 12 nieces and nephews among the 310 students from developmental kindergarten to 12th grade. Another 42 students attend the preschool.

Parents and colleagues say Hodge has brought a combination of faith, teamwork, stability and energy to this 104-year-old school, a close-knit community where people know one another and are quick to lend a helping hand.

It's fun, says counselor Lyndsay Lucas, who lies this place enough to make the 70 mile round trip from north of Grand Rapids each day. "School's fun."

Hodge spends as much time in the hallways and classrooms as he does in his office. In addition to running the school, he drives the school bus to field trips and sporting events, coaches volleyball and softball, and prays with his students each morning and at special devotions like the Stations of the Cross.

Most of all he is a "man of faith," those who know him say.

He really relies on prayer," said Fathe Larry King, pastor at St. Patrick Parish. "He believes coming here was a calling from God. He believes in letting the Lord do the leading. His coming here inspires the kids and inspires the faculty.

"You should be a teacher."

"For Hodge, major life decisions have a way of presenting themselves when he is visiting national landmarks. The first story goes something like this:

After graduating from St. Patrick in 1987, Hodge considered teaching. "But I was more motivated by money at the time, and I was going to be an accountant and then be rich," he recalled. So he went to Ferris State University, later transferring to Lansing Community College to study accounting and economics.

Not long before that, he had gone on his first date with his wife-to-be Michelle. They played mini-golf then talked the night away. After class that fateful day, he told Michelle he had decided to change majors. Before he went on, Michelle said, "I think you should be a teacher."

The next day Hodge enrolled at Central Michigan University, where he earned a bachelor's degree in secondary education with a major in social sciences and a minor in history. He graduated in December 1993, and he and Michelle were married the following summer.

The two headed out West for their honeymoon, where they visited Mt. Rushmore, along with Glacier and Yellowstone national parks. Hodge, who had been applying for jobs, had left his parents' number as a contact in those pre-cell phone days.

They were at the Montana-Idaho border when Hodge called home and learned he had a job interview lined up. The two drove through the next day and night to make it home in time for his interview for a middle-school teaching job at Central Montcalm schools. Hodge landed the job.

Over the years that followed, the Hodges remained active at St. Patrick. Michelle sings in the choir and Randy has taught religious education and serves as a Eucharistic minister. "The church has been a big part of our lives," Hodge said, noting that they both were baptized, received first reconciliation and first Communion at St. Pat's; attended the school and were married in the church.

Still, for Hodge, something was missing. That became evident to him when a Baptist colleague at Central Montcalm started questioning Hodge about his faith. "He was planting seeds of doubt in my mind. I had to make a decision: Is he right? Is the Catholic Church right or wrong?"

"I really prayed hard. I asked God to send me a sign."

Then one night Hodge decided he needed to study his own faith. He ordered books online and began reading the Bible. "Something just clicked," he recalled. "The Catholic Church is right. I need to be more committed to my faith."

Hodge joined the newly formed Men's group at St. Patrick, meeting at 6:30 a.m. two Saturdays per month to pray and share their faith. At a church dinner, he gave a faith testimony that brought many to tears. That evening someone said he ought to be St. Pat's next principal. "That's when the seed was planted," he recalled. "I hadn't given it a thought until that time."

The dugout revelation

Meanwhile, Hodge's career at Central Montcalm was going along swimmingly. He enjoyed teaching middle-school social studies, and was well respected. He and Michelle's family grew to two children, Savannah and Samuel.

Hodge coached the junior varsity softball team at St. Pat's. One night the team was clobbering the opposition, so one of his students and starter Kaity Goodrich sat out. She was chatting quietly with assistant coach Lyndsay Lucas about the news that the former principal at St. Pat's would be stepping down.

The three of them all remember that moment.,

"He spun around on his heels. He said, "What did you say?" recalls Lucas. "He was stunned. He got a little white, then a little red...." Looking back, Lucas sees biw ut was abitger sugb, "He was like, 'Okay God, I get it. I guess I'm going to apply."

Hodge remembers the moment. "God just said, 'You need to do this.' It hit me so hard," he recalls. That night when he came home it was the first thing he told Michelle.

Over the next month, Hodge prayed about whether to apply. "It was really a faith journey. I'd have a doubt....then I'd have someone say, 'Have you applied for the principal position?'" Ultimately he decided to apply. Afterward, several parents told him they'd been praying that would be his decision.

"When I look back at my life, God was preparing me for this," said Hodge., recalling the Baptist colleague who called his on his faith, teaching religious education, joinging the men's group. Throughout the application and interview process, "I felt very calm. I really felt the presence of the Holy Spirit guiding me through the whole thing."

After he applied, the family took a vacation out West in their fifth wheel to the Grand Canyon. They were visiting Utah when Hodge got the call, this time on his cell phone. Father King offered him the job, contingent on approval from the diocesan superintendent of schools.

The call from Dr. Bernard Stank, superintendent of Catholic Elementary Educatin in Grand Rapids, came on a morning when the family was at the Grand Canyon. The job was his. "After I got hired I sat down and prayed and I told the Holy Spirit: You got me this far---that was the easy part. Now I have to do the job. You can't bail on me now."

'A man of faith'

On a typical day Hodge arrives at St. Pat's around 7:15 a.m., in time to greet the high school students and pray with them at 7:30 a.m. Then he catches up on e-mail until younger students arrive at 8:30 a.m.

"Every morning the first thing we do is prayer," says Hodge. "That sets the tone for the day. Faith comes first, education comes next."

Parents say Hodge's faith rubs off on the students. "He is a very spiritual man," said Therese Jandernoa, who has two children currently enrolled at the school and three St. Pat's graduates. "His faith is very important to him."

Hodge is not afraid to share that faith with the students, said Jandernoa, who coordinates music for school Masses. For example, recently the school decided to start a junior-and high-school boys' choir. A few years ago that would have been hard to picture at this sports-oriented school. But Hodge practiced with the boys and they now sing at special Masses.

As she got to know him, Lucas saw that Hodge was not just an excellent educator "but a man of faith, which is hard to come by these days. It's great to have a male role model that can show the other guys it's not a bad thing to sing at church or be involved in church."

Hodge admits he was not a stellar student back in his high school days. "I always joke that that's why God sent me back here---to make sure that St. Pat's kids do what they're supposed to do and take it seriously and appreciate what their parents are paying for them to have."

"We're trying to grow in numbers and we're also trying to grow in faith," said Hodge, who hopes to graduate one priest every four years.

"The goal is that the kids will not just know their faith but understand how to live it," said Hodge. "I want them to understand Mass is very prayerful. It shouldn't be viewed as some boring repetitive thing you do every day. It should really be the basis of your life."

His efforts are well appreciated by staff and students. "We run the school together," said Lucas. "Everyone has a part in running the school and making this a good school. That's been his attitude from the get-go."

Students like the fact that he takes time to get to know them and is present in the hallways, at sporting activities, in the classrooms and at Mass and prayer services.

"He is very likeable," said Goodrich, now a senior. "He gets along well with the kids. They respect him."

Hodge hopes to stay at St. Pat's until he retires. In addition to his focus on faith, Hodge also has worked to upgrade technology, refine the curriculum, keep class sizes small and increase enrollment. He has launched a new "Try Us, You'll Like Us!" campaign that invites prospective students to attend St. Pat's for one quarter tuition-free.

"He's doing a bang-up job," said Father Larry King, who shares Hodge's vision of Catholic education as integrating faith, academics and daily life. "He really relies on prayer. That's the starting point for everything he does."