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Leaving a mark, making a mark*

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Quad 136

Leaving a Mark, Making a Mark

[Previous](#) [Next](#)

Leaving a Mark, Making a Mark*

New York Times columnist David Brooks has long been interested in character and the process by which individuals develop their character. He wrote a whole book on the topic called *The Road to Character*.

In a recent column, he explores the topic from a slightly different angle. He explores the characteristics of institutions that, as he **writes**, “leave a mark on people.” What kinds of institutions “become part of a person’s identity and engage the whole person: head, hands, heart and soul”?



Multiple Johnnie alumni sent me a link to this column, all saying that as they read it they had immediately thought of Saint John’s because it is an institution that left a mark on them. In my job as president, I have had the opportunity and pleasure to meet many hundreds, maybe even thousands, of Johnnies. What so many of these alumni tell me, either explicitly or through the lives they lead, is that Saint John’s left an indelible a mark on them—one that lasts a lifetime.

As you seniors get ready to finish your undergraduate experience at this rare and exceptional place, my fervent hope for you, and the wish of Johnnie alumni everywhere, is that this place has left a mark on you that will be a powerful part of your character in the years ahead and throughout your life.

Obviously each of you has had your own unique Saint John's experience, but I would suggest that there are three consistent ways in which Saint John's University marks its graduates, characteristics by which the world recognizes a Johnnie and maybe even expects from a Johnnie.

1. Johnnies have each other's backs. This is probably the most well-known aspect of the Johnnie character and it is closely connected to the success of the famous Johnnie network. With a mixture of wonder and respect, alums from other schools often remark on Johnnies' loyalty to SJU and to each other. At an admissions event, I asked the mother of a prospective student why her son was interested in Saint John's. She told me that she knew many Johnnies through her work and that they were all good guys that looked out for each other. Her son wanted to be part of a community like that, and she wanted that for her son.
2. Johnnies stand for something more than themselves. This is not to suggest that Johnnies are purely selfless, but rather that they combine their own self-interest with a commitment to something more, something bigger. It can be a commitment to their community, to their families, to their churches or even to their alma mater (as is true of so many alums in this room). As Brooks describes it, those marked by institutions like SJU have characters in which "selfishness and selflessness marry," to benefit the Johnnie and his community.
3. Johnnies live out the Benedictine teaching of respect for all individuals. *The Rule of St. Benedict* reminds us that we are to treat all as Christ—to respect the dignity and worth of every person. On campus we famously hold doors for each other as a small, daily reminder of the value of every individual. In the world beyond Collegeville, Johnnies treat co-workers, acquaintances and strangers with that same respect and courtesy that our shared humanity demands. This way of being in the world is even more important in a time of political polarization, where we seem to have lost the ability to listen to each other and civilly engage on matters of politics and social policy. Respectful Johnnies may, in some small way, help bridge these divides.



(courtesy of Sean Donohue)

Finally, as you leave Saint John's as "marked men," that is not the end of the story. In fact, it is really only the beginning. The faculty, staff, monks, fellow alumni and your peers who all played a part in this process of making you a Johnnie expect one more thing from you. We expect you to make your own mark in the world—to bring your Johnnie character to bear in all that you do, personally and professionally.

The world is a better place for having more Johnnies in it, and we look forward to seeing the fruits of the Class of 2017's dreams, endeavors and successes in the years ahead.

Congratulations and Godspeed.

*A version of this was given at the 2017 Senior Dinner.

By [Michael Hemesath](#) | April 26th, 2017 | Categories: [Alumni](#), [Higher Education](#) | [1 Comment](#)

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Michael Hemesath is the 13th president of Saint John's University. A 1981 SJU graduate, Hemesath is the first layperson appointed to a full presidential term at SJU. You can find him on Twitter [at] [PrezHemesath](#).