

A large portrait of Richard Plumb, a man with grey hair and glasses, wearing a dark suit, white shirt, and red tie. He is smiling slightly.

Into the Future

Meet Richard Plumb, Saint Mary's Next President

► BY LEEANNE JONES / PHOTOGRAPHY BY MARK BROWN

In his talks with the Saint Mary's community, Richard Plumb, PhD, who will become the 30th president of the College in July, often shares a personal story that conveys how much one teacher can positively impact a student's life.

When he was a high school senior struggling with academics, young Plumb took a career assessment test that suggested he pursue engineering. Intrigued, he told his guidance counselor that he wanted to study the subject. She replied: "Don't bother applying for engineering; no engineering school would ever accept you," Plumb recalled.

Plumb next headed to Syracuse University as an undeclared major, having been recruited by the rowing team. On his first day, he came upon a distinguished-looking man in the quad who struck up a conversation. When Plumb mentioned his counselor told him he wasn't smart enough for engineering, that man changed the direction of Plumb's life. "It turns out, he was the associate dean for the College of Engineering," said Plumb. "He transferred me into engineering by lunchtime. Four years later, I graduated at the top of my class."

Plumb was the first person in his family to graduate from college, and his parents weren't sure how to help. But one professor made an impact that let Plumb find his passion. He tries to pay this forward through his work in higher education.

"I'm a servant-leader. I got that early on; it's not about me," Plumb said. "How do I help others? How do I empower them? How do I help them achieve their maximum God-given potential? If I can do that, then I've been successful. To me, success is seeing others succeed."

Plumb's journey from undeclared undergrad to college president began with bachelor's, master's, and doctorate degrees in electrical engineering—all from Syracuse. He taught at the University of Kansas; Binghamton University of New York, where he was department chair; and Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles, where he became dean of the Seaver College of Science and Engineering. He is now completing his seventh year as the executive vice president and provost of the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul, Minn.



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Plumb is excited about his next leap. "I'm really looking forward to warm weather," he joked about returning to California, away from subzero temperatures. But he's equally serious about the move: "I'm looking forward to meeting the Saint Mary's community, the trustees, Brothers, the faculty, staff, alumni, and students...just the whole experience—and listening to their hopes and dreams for the institution."

Plumb, a champion of shared governance, believes the Saint Mary's community needs to work together. He says he is ready to take on big decisions by following the moral compass of the Lasallian principles as well as seeking input from a diverse range of stakeholders.

"I still consider myself first and foremost a professor," said Plumb, who taught for 32 years. "The faculty and staff have this enormous wealth of knowledge, and we need to collaborate to solve challenges. We're equal partners in this institution."

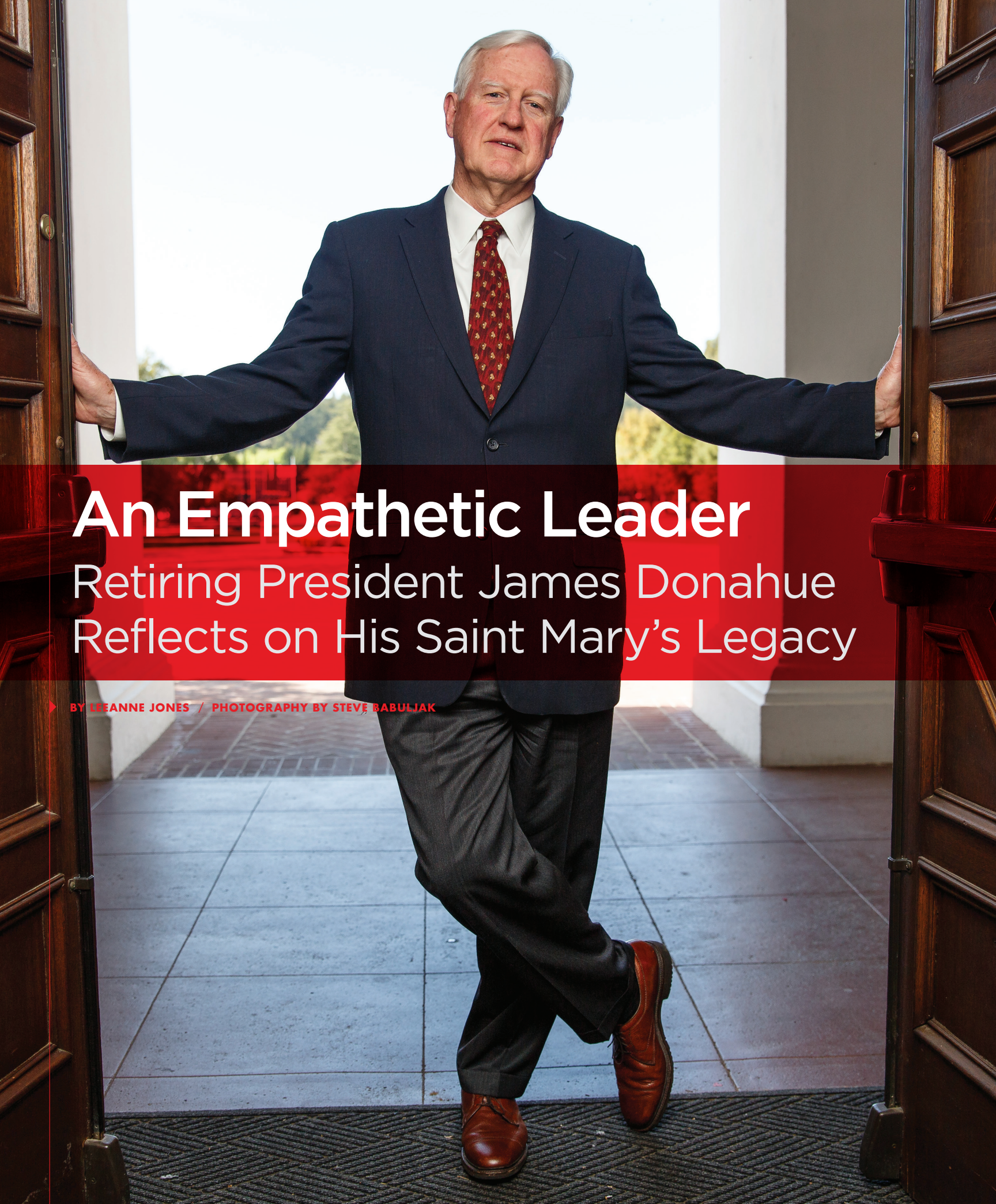
Plumb feels particularly drawn to Saint Mary's core values of promoting education and social equity. "One of my primary responsibilities will be to ensure that the institution stays true to its Catholic, Lasallian, and liberal arts traditions," said Plumb. "How do we continue to enhance that going forward? I think a school like Saint Mary's, considering its location in

the Bay Area, can be a leader in social justice, partnering with corporations and nonprofits, and working together to address some of society's big problems."

One immediate challenge facing Plumb will be managing the post-pandemic environment to provide a quality education that is affordable and sustainable. "I have a responsibility to ensure that Saint Mary's is thriving into the future. The decisions we make in the next five to 10 years will impact the institution 50 years from now," Plumb said.

Plumb was appointed upon the unanimous recommendation of the Saint Mary's College Board of Trustees after an extensive yearlong search. "Richard not only understands the issues facing higher education today, he demonstrated to us how a university can succeed in today's environment," said Kim Vogel, Saint Mary's trustee and search committee co-chair. "His considerable experience in fundraising, program development, and diversity initiatives made it clear that his unifying vision can lead Saint Mary's to the next level."

Please join us in welcoming President Richard Plumb to our university beginning this July.



An Empathetic Leader

Retiring President James Donahue Reflects on His Saint Mary's Legacy

BY LEEANNE JONES / PHOTOGRAPHY BY STEVE BABULJAK

For James Donahue, serving as president of Saint Mary's isn't just a job; it's a vocation. During his nearly eight years at the school's helm, Donahue has felt a strong, often divine summons to find ways to balance tradition and innovation. He has spent time in the College Chapel almost daily to ask questions and seek direction through quiet prayer and meditation.

"I'm always trying to discern what I'm being called to do, and I strive to make careful decisions based on the specific circumstances at hand," he said.

Donahue, who is retiring in June, has been reflecting a great deal on how the College has shaped him, as well. The role of president has repeatedly stretched his thinking, he said. He strives to uphold the school's Lasallian, Catholic, and liberal arts principles while also meeting the current academic and career needs of students, faculty, staff, and administrators—as well as guide the institution confidently forward into the changing higher education landscape.

"Saint Mary's has helped me understand that vocation is very complex, always expanding, always asking more," Donahue said. "It's not a quest for perfection. It's about being the best we can be and reaching out to something more than what we are experiencing right now."

Donahue says he's deliberately supported all efforts to keep vocation at the forefront of the Saint Mary's experience, and that has meant asking life's biggest questions. He did this by teaching the Collegiate Seminar, holding public forums (such as the one with William M. Sullivan, author of *Liberal Learning as a Quest for Purpose*), and inviting alum Mahershala Ali '96 to deliver the 2016 graduation address right before he won two Academy Awards.

"Donahue has led with empathy, vision, and a clear commitment to the school's religious values," said Vice President for Mission Frances Sweeney '86, MA '08, PhD, who once co-taught the Collegiate Seminar with Donahue. "For the faculty and staff, this can be seen in how he championed us to learn and live our Lasallian values in setting priorities, making decisions, and conducting our work. For the students, he has invited our entire community to consider our education as one that encourages regular reflection and questions, with an aim to help students discern their calling, for themselves and for how they will be in the world."

Donahue has been a staunch advocate for Saint Mary's and will be remembered for leading the most successful Capital Campaign in the College's history. The Campaign for Saint Mary's: *Defining the Future* launched publicly in 2018 with the goal of raising \$125 million to invest in academic excellence; support student scholarships; strengthen the Lasallian, Catholic mission; and fund operations. It exceeded its goal by nearly \$11 million, raising \$136 million. Donahue has focused recently on a three-year initiative, the SMC Scholarship Initiative: Students First. As part of this effort, Saint Mary's announced the James A. Donahue Presidential Endowed Scholarship, which leverages public and private funding to provide full-tuition scholarships for new students with strong academic promise and high financial need, in an effort to attract the best students to Saint Mary's.

As most anyone on campus will tell you, Donahue is a warm, friendly people person, and he says some of his best decisions have involved hiring the right individuals. He filled several key administrative roles in his tenure. "Any responsible and ethical organization realizes it's about people," he said. "I've been focused on making sure the people we have here are the right people. I feel very good about leaving Saint Mary's in capable hands."

He has also worked hard to elevate Saint Mary's among larger academic institutions. In his October 2013 inaugural address, he expressed a desire to take the College's reputation from hidden gem to polished gem. "I wanted Saint Mary's to be explicit, to be known, for it to be very clear that what we do here is unique, in terms of the personal attention, quality education, and development of the whole person," he said.

While Donahue leaves Saint Mary's in a good place, the next president will surely face unique challenges, such as navigating the long-term impact of a global pandemic on higher education and encouraging common ground in a polarized time. But Donahue has helped ease the transition in at least one significant way. As the first non-Christian Brother to serve as president, he built the relational bridge between his office and the Christian Brothers that future lay leaders will walk and grow to serve the College for years to come.

Looking ahead, Donahue plans to spend more time with family and start consulting in the areas of professional ethics and Catholic higher education. "I want to be able to take what I've learned over my professional life and give it back to others," he said. He also hopes to remain connected to the Saint Mary's community. In that vein, Saint Mary's has recently announced that both Donahue and his wife, Jane Purinton—a dedicated educator herself—have been named lifelong alumni, which suits the couple well.

"I love being a Gael," Donahue said.

"What we do here is unique, in terms of personal attention and quality education..."