

Teacher of the Month

Jim Saali imparts global knowledge with a local perspective



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In 2015 Jim Saali and his wife, Sallye, had “a glorious idea to move to Phoenix,” Mr. Saali recalls in a tone indicating the idea was anything but. “We lasted one year. We were so homesick.” Living several states away, Mr. Saali was wistful for the little things, like running into friends and students at the grocery store. After teaching Spanish at De Smet Jesuit High School for 22 years, he was used to these chance encounters happening all the time — and he missed them tremendously.

When St. John Vianney High School offered him a position teaching Spanish for the 2016 school year, Mr. Saali says it felt like the Kirkwood high school was essentially asking: Do you want to come home? “It’s so Vianney,” he says. “That’s how they handle everything: with a family spirit and a strong sense of community. When it comes down to it, it’s about people, and I can’t think of a better place for me to be than Vianney.”

Mr. Saali fell in love with the Spanish language as a freshman at Saint Louis Preparatory Seminary South in Shrewsbury. He took Spanish all four years in high school, then spent the summer after his senior year as an exchange student in

Barcelona. He’s still in touch with his host family, and his former high school teacher, Jim Beatty, continues to teach Spanish, now at Lindbergh High School. Coming full circle, it’s Mr. Saali who accompanies his own students on trips to Spain — and last year Italy, too — every other summer.

Even in his 26th school year, Mr. Saali appreciates something different about all levels of Spanish education. Of the freshmen, he says, “I love their curiosity. For many of them it’s their first time taking a language, and I pride myself on making it a unique, energetic class. In Level 3 Spanish, they put it all together. They read short stories, they listen to music.”

He loves when astonished parents report that their kids are speaking Spanish at home, and he’s humbled that one of those parents went out of their way to nominate him for the St. Louis Post-Dispatch Teacher of the Month. “Parents entrust us with their young sons, and after four years we return them as young men of character and accomplishment by planting seeds so that they take ownership in their education and grow in their faith. The school is full of great role models.”

Besides the academic successes that come from day-to-day instruction, Mr. Saali also finds fulfillment in his job years after his students have graduated. “It’s hearing that my students are inspired to travel or immerse themselves in a new culture and knowing that it started in my class. Today it’s a global world, and I think that when you talk about inclusion and respect for everyone — re-



Jim Saali receives a check from Shannon Keller

gardless of religious or ethnic background — that respect for all people can start in a Spanish class.”

Learning a foreign language isn’t easy for everybody, and Mr. Saali occasionally uses the same strategies in the classroom as he does on the field. This year marks his 47th season coaching soccer at local schools, including Nerinx Hall, Cor Jesu Academy, Parkway South, De Smet, as well as Vianney. “I tell students, ‘You know, I was never good at word problems in math or at guitar.’ I try to highlight what they’re good at, and sometimes, that’s all they need: to gain confidence and to want to try. It’s hard to avoid being a teacher and a coach at the same time!”

Mr. Saali strongly believes that foreign language is a path to empathy and inclusion — and to the world at large. But he also believes in nurturing character one student at a time here in St. Louis. “It’s

about community and building relationships. It’s about being able to see these students years down the road, and they come with a firm handshake. That I could help them become a better man or woman. I couldn’t have found a better place to come back home to.”

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TEACHER OF THE MONTH
IS PRESENTED BY:



Jim Saali and principal Ian Mulligan

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