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Christian Brothers' mission same 112 years later

By **BONNIE WARD**
SACRAMENTO UNION STAFF WRITER

After 23 years, Doug Carson still sounds a bit wistful when recalling his days at Christian Brothers High School in Sacramento — where thousands of boys over the years have grown from gangly youths into young men.

"I have some great memories of the Brothers," said Carson, referring to the brotherhood of Christian laymen who founded and continue to operate the private Catholic school.

"There's a closeness created with them. . . I graduated 23 years ago. But I still have tremendous affection and

thoughts of several of the Brothers that taught me."

Twelve members of Carson's family — uncles, cousins, brothers, a son — have graduated from Christian Brothers.

His other son currently attends. The all-boys' school has been around for 112 years. And people like Carson are bound and determined that it's going to be around for 112 more.

Carson is a member of the school's newly formed public relations and marketing committee, just one of several signs that Christian Brothers is out to spruce up its public image to attract more students.

Sheer necessity is prompting the move-

ment. Enrollment at the high school has reached an all-time low of 550 students — down from 720 in 1982.

Sales at Christian Brothers winery in Napa Valley, which underwrites costs at Christian Brothers schools throughout the world, have fallen off while the expense of running the schools has continued to rise. And last year, dwindling finances forced the layoff of three teachers.

Add to this the school's unwavering commitment to provide a Christian education to the less fortunate, and it spells some real financial challenges.

"We have a commitment to the poor," said Kevin Matheny, the school's vice

principal. "That's our history. That's why our founder St. John B. de La Salle started the schools: to provide a Christian education to anybody who wanted it, particularly the poor."

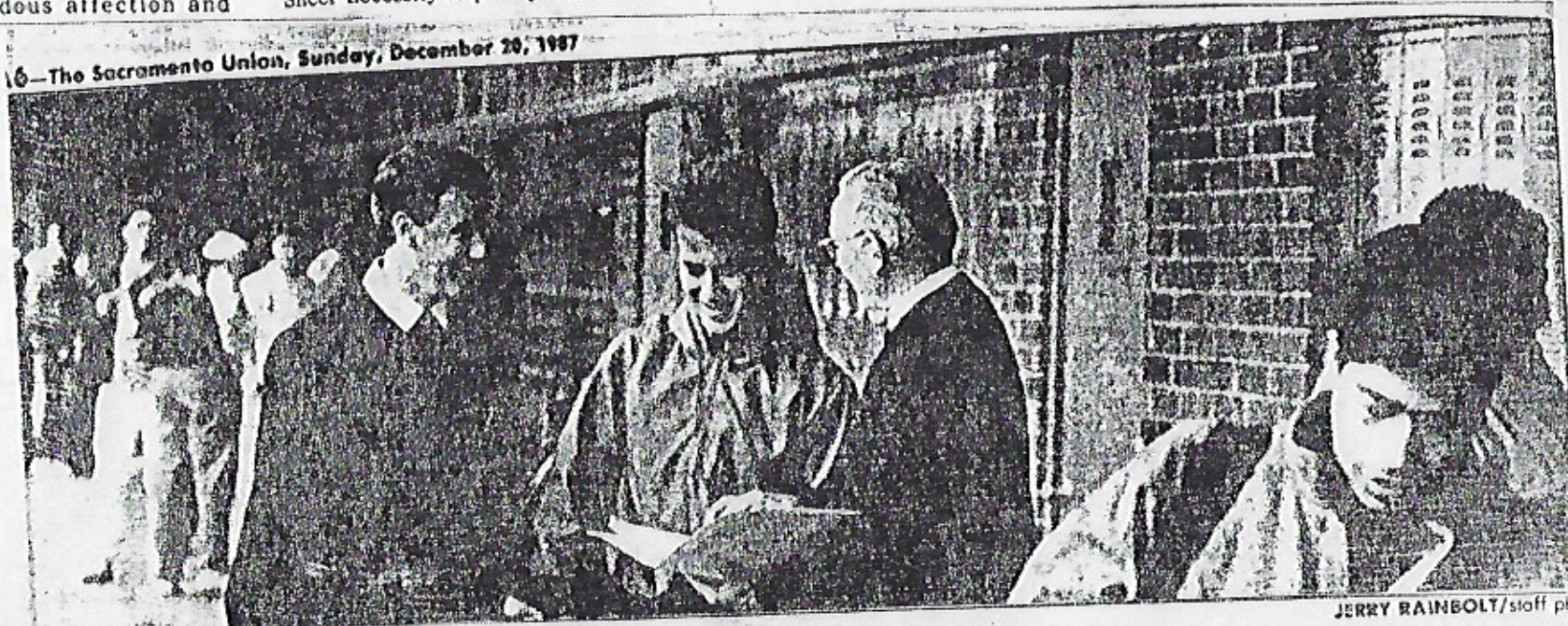
It is a charge Christian Brothers takes quite seriously, with one-fourth of the school's students receiving financial assistance.

The other students pay \$2,700 annual tuition, \$1,100 less than the \$3,800 it actually costs to educate them.

The school offsets its operating costs with sales from the winery, funding from

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JERRY RAINBOLT/staff photo

Kevin Matheny and Brother Adrian talk to student Kirk Nichols.

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the Catholic diocese, community-sponsored scholarships and an aggressive fund-raising campaign.

This year, it will couple that with an intensified recruitment effort.

"If we can attract more students, we can make it more affordable for everyone," Carson said. "But still, we're not going to turn away students that can't afford to come here."

Laura Yanes, chairwoman of the public relations committee, began updating the school's image by replacing the conservative grey program overview with a new slick version that depicts a Brothers football player on the front cover.

"Will Christian Brothers be number one this year?" asks the pamphlet in an obvious play on the school's reputation for championship athletic teams.

Open the pamphlet and there stands a Christian Brothers graduate. The pamphlet goes on to explain that the high school is first rate whether on the football field or in the classroom.

Other marketing techniques to be employed include a recruitment video and parent orientation nights.

The Brothers also hope to bring their recruitment message into the public schools.

Long-term plans call for relocating the school on a new, as yet undetermined, site. That move is partially prompted by complaints about the school's location in Oak Park, which has an image as a low-income neighborhood.

Carson believes one of the school's biggest challenges is overcoming misconceptions in the community about what the school has to offer.

"They think that we're rich or we're almost like a seminary school. That all we do is push religion down

'We go beyond being just teachers'

The day starts early for Brother Kevin Michael. It's up at 5:30 and on to an early morning liturgy at 6:45 a.m.

He's in the classroom at Christian Brothers High School by 7 a.m.

The 25-year-old Michael, who looks scarcely older than his students, begins every class with a prayer and is very aware of his ability to serve as a role model for his students.

"We try to go beyond being just teachers," he said. "The Brothers of De La Salle try to emulate Christian values the same way our founder did 300 years ago."

Michael is one of 11 Brothers at the high school, and among 9,000 Brothers throughout the world, who have taken vows and devoted their lives to the education of Christian young men.

The Brothers, part of a religious order founded by St. John Baptist de La Salle 300 years ago in France, live in community in a house adjacent to the private Catholic boy's school.

Their doors always open to the students, the

Brothers say the youth often drop by in the evenings or on weekends to visit or discuss a problem.

Brother Martin, who serves as campus minister, talks to students about family or personal problems — divorce, drug use or even a breakup with a girlfriend.

"The boys will drop by and say 'Brother let's go have a pizza or go to movie.' Or they'll just say, 'Let's go out and talk,'" he said.

"I've lived with their problems. I've lived with their joys... I become personally involved with them. I visit a lot of their homes, their parents," he added.

Martin also takes the boys out to do community service, one of the requirements to graduate from Christian Brothers.

On Thanksgiving, for instance, 25 students and several alumni fed the poor at St. Francis Church.

"To go out and meet street people and to work with them is an extension of the classroom in a very realistic way," he said. "It's things like that that make me so in love with this school."

— BONNIE WARD

your throat," he said.

Although religion is a very real part of the school's curriculum, Matheny said the school is not out to recruit people for the Catholic Church.

Indeed, 22 percent of the school's students are non-Catholics.

"In the scripture study, the emphasis is always on trying to make religion understandable and real to them in their own lives. It's not a memorization of catechism," Matheny said.

Another thing that gives people pause, say school officials, is that no girls attend Christian Brothers. It is a matter on which the students have some definite views.

"With no girls here, there's no one to impress. We don't have to worry about how we look. We can just be

ourselves," said student body president Kirk Nichols.

Nichols, an honor student, said he enjoys the camaraderie of being in an all-boys school and adds that he believes his grades might not be as high with girls there to distract him.

Other boys interviewed had similar reactions, saying they feel more relaxed without girls present.

However, they do look forward to shared dances and other activities with the students from St. Francis, an all-girl Catholic high school in Sacramento.

Besides the lack of girls, the students had some other pointed views about what makes the school unique.

Mark Lanz, a 17-year-old senior who attended public high school last year, said he gets more individual-

ized attention and concern from his teachers at Christian Brothers.

"There's so many people in public school that the teachers don't have time to take an interest in you."

Other students interviewed mentioned the school's rigorous academic program, which sees 90 percent of the high school's graduates attending college.

But ultimately the students' praises wound their way back to the Brothers — the 11-member group of laymen who live in community next to the campus and who, by example, teach the young men about what it means to live a Christian life.

"The Brothers are more than just teachers," Nichols said. "They set a good example for us by being there for other people. So then we try to be there for other people too."

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