

PETER'S PROMISE St. Gerard Society ... *for Life*



Peter Ramah, Father Randy Kelly and Peter Bartels pose for a portrait following a Mass of Thanksgiving at the Nouvel Catholic Central High School Chapel in Saginaw.

cover story

Story by Danielle McGrew Tenbusch | Photos by Jeff Schrier

Peter Ramah has always had a special connection to Catholic schools. He attended a Catholic school. His children were educated in Catholic schools, and he coached the Nouvel Catholic Central High School hockey team in Saginaw. But since 2016, the connection has grown even deeper. He helped establish a society to offer tuition assistance to students. He also carries a physical connection to Nouvel Catholic Central High School with him everywhere—a kidney donated by social studies teacher Peter Bartels.

"I have a special affinity for this school, the kids, the administrators and teachers," Ramah said.

He often shared his desire to see more children enrolled in Catholic schools. In October 2016, while attending a Catholic school fundraiser, his nephew challenged him to "do something about it." So, with his nephew and 11 other Saginaw-area Catholics, Ramah helped establish the St. Gerard Society to award scholarships to Catholic school students in the diocese.

"This is simply the best education that a child can get," Ramah said. "Forming children in the teachings of Christ is part of our mission."

To raise necessary funds, Ramah drew inspiration from a friend who is a member of the West Bloomfield 100 Club. The group of 100 women each pledge \$1,000 annually and then award the total donation each year to a different charitable organization.

"I thought it was a great concept," he said. "We could get members to anonymously donate money for a good cause, and the good cause is to help deserving families and students with tuition assistance."

Working with the Catholic Community Foundation of Mid-Michigan, the St. Gerard Society was established before the end of 2016.

After meeting with the late Bishop

Joseph Cistone and receiving his blessing, the St. Gerard Society officially began its fundraising efforts in February 2017. The group composed a letter soliciting inaugural donations to the cause.

Community responds and supports enrollment

"By our first meeting for St. Gerard Society in October 2017, we had raised \$92,000," Ramah said.

In just two years, the St. Gerard Society has now raised more than \$400,000 and awarded more than \$100,000 to students. The schools' financial aid offices distribute the funds according to their guidelines.

"St. Gerard Society is encouraging all parents and grandparents to consider enrolling their children (and) grandchildren ... in Catholic schools in the diocese," Ramah said. "There are multiple scholarships available from different organizations in the diocese. Of course, the St. Gerard Society will do its best to help assist any child."

Each Catholic school in the Diocese of Saginaw has its own fund; donors select to which fund they wish to contribute. The St. Gerard Society currently has members contributing funds for Nouvel Catholic Central Schools in Saginaw, St. Brigid in Midland, St. Elizabeth in Reese and St. Michael in Pinconning. The society hopes that, as they continue to grow, there will



Peter Ramah and Peter Bartels each have a pin that, when combined, form a green ribbon and message for organ donation awareness.

be scholarships available for every school in the diocese.

"There are a lot of Catholics that still believe in the basic precepts of a Catholic parochial education," he said. "There are a lot of Catholics who feel faith formation is part of the educational process, and the members of St. Gerard feel the same way."

The society's donors also endowed a \$100,000 fund for Nouvel Catholic Central Elementary School in honor of the school's long-serving principal Sister Ann deGuise. An endowed scholarship invests the donated money and gives out a portion of the fund balance, including interest, each year to students. Their long-term goal is to establish an endowed fund of \$1 million, but the society is also focused on meeting families' immediate needs to provide a Catholic education.

"If we can keep up and sustain our donations, we'd like to think that we could award scholarships of over \$100,000 each year," Ramah said.

Cormac Lynn, superintendent of Catholic schools for the Diocese of Saginaw, said the society's commitment to Catholic education is a blessing.

"The success of the St. Gerard Society over just a few years is a clear indication of the positive impact that Catholic education has had, and continues to have, throughout our community," Lynn said. "There are students in our schools today

ST. GERARD SOCIETY



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St. Gerard
During your earthly life you responded without hesitation to the needs of the poor, those in distress, and especially caring for the well-being of mothers and children.

And so good and generous people have gathered in your name, working to ensure that every child in the community of the Saginaw Diocese can be formed as a Christian disciple by enjoying the opportunity to attend a Catholic School.

ST. GERARD, we ask that you intercede on behalf of our children asking the Holy Spirit to inspire others to respond with generous hearts to this work of passing on our faith in Jesus Christ to the next generation.

St. Gerard

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one, who is also a member.

,000 raised in 2018

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"Of what use

cannot give support?"

A card for the St. Gerard Society notes the organization's mission, as well as information about giving and more. Since all overhead expenses are donated by SGS members, 100 percent of all donations are used for tuition assistance. The prayer on the card was written by Father Randy Kelly.

who would not be there if it were not for the support provided by the St. Gerard Society."

Mark Frost, principal of Nouvel Catholic Central High School, agrees.

"It is truly a pleasure to be a part of an effort that provides so much encouragement and support for current and future generations of young people," he said.

Praying for a miracle

While Ramah continued working to give the gift of education, he was hoping for his own miracle – the gift of life.

"I was diagnosed with kidney

failure four years ago and my doctor said it would be just a matter of time before my kidneys totally failed. I had a tough time accepting it," Ramah said. "In August of 2016, my doctor told me that he wanted to see if I would qualify for a kidney transplant through Henry Ford Hospital (in Detroit.)"

Unfortunately, no one in his family proved to be a match.

"During this time, I prayed, talked to God, trying to say, 'Look, I've got more to do.' ... We had started this St. Gerard Society, and I didn't want to let them down," Ramah said. "If I had to go on dialysis, I would be tethered to a dialysis unit three days a week, five hours each day ... I might have had to leave the St. Gerard Society because I couldn't fulfill my director duties. So I just asked God to help me."

During that time, he made a promise to God: "If God could help

me, I was going to do my best to help the St. Gerard Society effort."

With help from friends and Father Randy Kelly, Ramah began to spread the word about the need for a kidney through social media and letters distributed to the Saginaw County Bar Association, the Saginaw County Courthouse and the Nouvel Catholic Central community.

"Father Randy Kelly was very instrumental to helping me out," Ramah said. "A lot of people got involved in this."

Hospital staff told Ramah that their phone lines were "being flooded with callers" wanting to be tested.

"I can't emphasize this enough: it's really the Catholic community that came together for me," Ramah said.

At one point, the nurse managing potential donor testing told Ramah that they didn't need any more peo-

"If God could help me, I was going to do my best to help the St. Gerard Society effort."

For more information, visit www.stgerardsociety.org or www.facebook.com/SaintGerardSociety



ple calling. Unbeknownst to Ramah, a match had been found.

Peter Bartels, a social studies teacher at Nouvel Catholic Central High School, knew he wanted to be tested as soon as he heard about Ramah's need for a kidney. The two were acquaintances—Bartels had taught both of Ramah's children—but they were not close friends. Still, Bartels described it as "instinct" and "something (he) felt called to do."

"I just knew that he was a parent and a parishioner at St. Thomas (Aquinas) and he had asked people. He had the courage to ask ... for help," Bartels said.

Bartels underwent a thorough medical and psychological assessment to confirm that he would be a suitable donor. He opted to not tell Ramah of the match in case there were any medical changes.

"It was a very strange thing for these two years, almost, where I really wanted to reach out," he said. "It was a weird thing to keep secret."

A life committed to Catholic schools

In late June 2018, Henry Ford Hospital contacted Ramah to tell him they had a match—a teacher from Nouvel. On July 12, Father Kelly celebrated Mass for the Ramah and Bartels families. The next day, the



two men went into surgery for the kidney transplant. Both procedures were successful; Ramah is now doing well and Bartels ran his 98th marathon just 14 weeks post-operation.

In November, the Ramah and Bartels families joined Father Randy Kelly once more, this time to celebrate a small Mass of Thanksgiving at Nouvel Catholic Central High School. The Gospel, fittingly, told the story of a blind man begging Jesus: "Son of David, have pity on me!" (Luke 18:35-43)

"That was us, crying out to God, 'Have pity on Peter,'" Father Kelly said during his homily.

Father Kelly recalled that during Ramah's years of battling kidney failure, Ramah's primary concern was the St. Gerard Society.

"As his numbers diminished, the intensity of his efforts on behalf of Catholic education increased," he said. "He was using all kinds of energy to get the St. Gerard Society off the ground. It was almost like he wanted to make sure his life's work was done in case his earthly life had come to an end. ... Since he found out he was sick, it's been his primary purpose in life to see that the schools get better as his health improves."

Father Kelly described Ramah's work with the society as "pastoral," recognizing the need for scholarships and using his resources to reach out to those who might be able to satisfy that need.

Bartels, who is also a member of

the St. Gerard Society, said he admires Ramah's dedication to Catholic education and assisting students.

"This is an individual who loves life, an active person. He's active in church; he's active in our school community. He and the inaugural members of the St. Gerard Society have come up with this creative solution for people who want Catholic education," Bartels said of Ramah. "Peter has a plan and I believe that's part of God's plan for our schools, too."

Ramah, meanwhile, continues to focus on growing the St. Gerard Society to increase their impact across the diocese.

"I'm totally blessed and totally grateful," Ramah said. "But I'm pragmatic. I've got more work to do. I made a promise." †

Left: Peter Ramah's mother, Pearl, bought this statue of St. Gerard and prayed for his intercession before Peter's birth. When Peter, whose middle name is Gerard, moved to Michigan in 1974, he brought the statue with him.

Right: Father Randy Kelly celebrates a Mass of Thanksgiving for the Ramah and Bartels families in November 2018. The families first gathered for Mass with Father Kelly the day before the transplant surgery in July 2018.

St. Gerard Society by the numbers

- Members: **123**
- Currently assisting: **55 students**
- 2018 scholarship total: **\$62,000**
- Total scholarships awarded since 2017: **\$100,000+**
- Total funds raised: **\$400,000+**