

#SMILE50

Celebrating half a century of learning, helping, and growing.

by Joe Sommo '03

Peer to peer. Like to like. Group counseling among friends in a comfortable, judgment-free environment. The humble beginnings of one of the most immensely successful afterschool programs in Molloy history took root in the early 1960's, when a tall, brawny, imposing man named Brother Leo Richard began changing lives. Known to many as "the man with the booming voice," Leo bounded in and out of classrooms and offices with enthusiasm and heart. He would often point to a student in the hall, tell him to meet him (all boys at the time) after school, and then suddenly vanish. The befuddled student would meet Leo as requested, unsure of what to expect. Any trepidation that existed would vanish as quickly as Br. Leo upon his first appearance, as the counselor would get to the crux of the issue: *who are you and how can I help?*



Above: Brother Leo Richard (far right) and Mrs. Sheila Murphy are all smiles with an uncaptioned student in the 1984 yearbook.

Leo would meet with students every single day. He would spend a full day teaching and then make himself available to meet anytime, anywhere, and for as long as necessary. He met with students without fail even though he didn't have an office of his own. Eventually one of the other Brothers let him borrow his office. Leo began to meet there so frequently that eventually it was given to him. That office was room 304. A small, dark, cramped room on the third floor of a Marist Catholic high school in Briarwood, Queens is where Leo's vision would begin to take shape.



SMILE co-founders pictured left to right: Brother Francis Regis, Brother Ronald Marcellin, Dr. Patrick Murphy, and Dr. Robert Englert.

“SMILE doesn't mean Brother Leo. It means we. It's always we...”

– Br. Leo Richard
SMILE Founder

Students were drawn to Leo's passionate character. They brought their friends, their girlfriends, anyone they could think of to meet with him. He was often asked to visit with parishioners at local churches to speak with the people that they cared about. He was working seemingly non-stop on a mission to help every last person he could. It wasn't before long that Leo began to crash. He came down with an illness and spent time at Esopus to recuperate. He was told by his doctors to slow down or his health would be at risk. This hit Leo hard. He began to relax his busy mind, but also started thinking of ways to continue his counseling without becoming exhausted.

Br. Leo put his new insights into action upon his healthy return to Molloy. To help his work he recruited some of the young people who he had previously counseled – kids that had worked out some of their own problems. These students would not only sit in on counseling sessions, but would drive them. Leo began to refer to the concept as “likes on likes” – peer counselors who had already “been through it”. They had the experience and were in a natural position to help others free themselves from the trials and tribulations of teenaged life. Along the way, Leo and his peer counselors had come up with a name for what was happening in room 304: SMILE...Something More in Life's Experience. By the 1970's, the popular afterschool program had finally earned a spot in the Blue & White Yearbook.

In essence, however, SMILE was not just an afterschool program. Its presence was felt by counselors and members at all times. Whenever they felt challenged, or afraid, or like they didn't know what their next step should or would be, they knew they always had SMILE to

lean on. In 1971, the guidance and religion departments, recognizing the value of SMILE, decided together that every sophomore at Molloy should have an opportunity to experience peer group counseling. It would officially become part of the sophomore curriculum later that year.

After nearly a decade, Br. Leo and SMILE had already made history at Molloy. In 1973, that history was validated by Francis X. Clines, a journalist for the New York Times. “*Students Advised by Students*” was published on September 16, 1973. An excerpt from the article reads: “Girls in their lives, college and career choices were discussed by each, with a number speaking of leaving home. Optimism was the unspoken consensus until one young man brought the group up short by interrupting; ‘Yeah, well how many are really leaving home mainly to get away from it?’ Four hands went up and the session ended with the problem unsettled, but out in the open.” Clines had recognized the power that SMILE had. Students who sat in on sessions had no fear of speaking their minds, of addressing the tough issues or being honest with each other. It was a vehicle to allow any repressed thought to be offered up for discussion. Understanding each other would help individuals understand themselves.

Another aspect that Clines's article revealed to the public was that SMILE was a big program. What began in tiny room 304, or what had by now come to be known as “The Cave”, had spawned

dozens of counseling sessions too big for Br. Leo and his peer counselors to manage. The influence of SMILE spread wide enough that even more hands were needed on deck. Over the years Leo would go on to enlist a number of faculty members, close friends and other professionals to moderate groups of students. People like Br. Francis Regis, Br. Ronald Marcellin, Dr. Patrick Murphy and his mother Sheila, Dr. Robert Englert, Mari Hart, Mary Michels, Fr. Edward Doran, Br. James Norton... the list goes on and on. So many people were tapped to nurture the SMILE program, each one bringing their own unique approach to helping teens.

In 1989, SMILE celebrated its silver anniversary. The once humble program had reached its 25 year milestone, revolutionizing counseling as a whole in the process and serving as a model in the mental health field for many practitioners. The then members of SMILE joined their counselors for a birthday party of sorts, complete with a cake and candles. Also included was a video camera, which documented over two hours of the milestone celebration.

Among those featured in the now historic video is Br. Regis. “There are a lot of people in this room who have gone a long way through the SMILE program. I've encouraged a lot of you to talk to each other, and I think you're fantastic people because of it. Not that you weren't that way when you started out, but you didn't know how good you were,” says Br. Regis to his SMILE students. Joseph Egan '89, a peer group leader and senior who was inspired greatly by Br. Leo, is also a featured speaker in the video. “I can't believe it's time to leave now. I've been through so much at the school,” says Egan of his upcoming graduation. “I made so many real friends – friends that really care about me. I'm happy and content in leaving knowing that I've touched so many lives. SMILE has helped to make a better and stronger person out of me.” Also appearing is Christopher Dougherty '91, a shy kid who opened up and built confidence within the confines of SMILE. “Although I've only known you [Br. Leo] for two years, I feel like I've known you a lifetime. Thanks for all of your great work,” Chris shares on camera. Joe and Chris represent just two of literally thousands of students who have been inspired by this extraordinary program.



Pictured: The first page of a New York Times article published in 1973 profiling the peer to peer counseling program at Molloy.



Ashley Colletti
Class of 2005

Molloy's guidance department and SMILE transformed me and led me to my career as a social worker. The skills I learned as a Peer Group Leader are the foundation of my work doing mental health counseling with young and elderly people. SMILE encouraged me to let my gifts shine and I strive to make others feel that valued.



Dennis DeMarinis
Class of 1994

At times I was bullied and had low self-esteem, but my SMILE counselors really helped me through all of that. To this day I remember SMILE and everything that I learned. I often talk to Br. Leo, Pat Murphy, Br. Regis and Mary Michels in my thoughts and ask them, "Am I doing the right thing?" I look forward to doing my part to continuing the work of the SMILE founders.



Ed Caslin
Class of 1981

Br. Regis, my first counselor, was instrumental in helping me to develop some basic self-confidence. Then with Br. James Norton I volunteered at Creedmoor hospital with the psychiatric children. It changed the way I looked at life. It wasn't just about grades or sports anymore. It was about impacting other people's lives and being impacted in return.



Samantha Traslavina
Class of 2010

In high school I used to be uncomfortable in my own skin, but SMILE gave me a space that let me express myself. What I learned in SMILE has stayed with me as an adult. It's now easier for me to be social and I'm no longer judgmental of others because you never know what someone else is going through.



Melanie Santos
Class of 2015

SMILE offers a sense of community. We talked about things in those meetings that I would have never talked about with anyone else. It got me to open up. I attribute my sense of belonging and feeling like part of a family to the SMILE groups I participated in. I will always appreciate what SMILE has done for me.



Pat Devaney
Class of 1986

I lost my dad when I was 15 years old. I thought I was strong, but I was weak and I didn't know it. I was failing classes and bottoming out, but Br. Leo, Br. Ron and Mrs. Michels looked after me. They made sure I remained in school. Eventually I became a SMILE leader and graduated. The things I learned in SMILE have stayed with me. I relive my SMILE story every single day.



Jessica Stola
Class of 2010

When I was at Molloy my parents were going through a divorce and it was difficult for me to focus on school. SMILE gave me the opportunity to make friends who really wanted to help me. Later in college I lost a friend to suicide, so I came back to Molloy to talk to my SMILE counselor, Ms. Loo. She helped me so much. SMILE is such a great big support system.



Derrick Yuen
Class of 2013

I really had a hard time meeting people when I was younger because sometimes I felt lonely. However with SMILE I was able to develop this idea of finding my personality and also started to put trust in others. Doc and Br. Regis helped me build my character. I became more social and found friends that I will keep for a lifetime.

Before the video concludes, Br. Leo himself takes center stage. Not one to seek out recognition, Leo is quick to deflect the success of SMILE to his colleagues and the students themselves. "All this SMILE stuff doesn't mean Brother Leo Richard. It means we. It's always we. There's so many people involved in SMILE. What is SMILE? What is the goal? That every boy sitting here loves who he is. Not having this arrogance about you where you step on people and make yourself look good, but to think about your everyday actions and to love who you are. The greatest aspect of your faith in God would be you being who you are and really desiring to be positive to your neighbor even when you'd rather throw a hand grenade," says Leo, his signature Boston accent accompanying every word.

Leo meant a lot to many people. His long insightful walks, his deep and piercing talks, and his care for each and every student built the foundation of SMILE. He was the rock for many who needed a stabilizing force in their lives – a father that many never had. It was for these reasons that Leo's passing in 1995 hit many people hard. It was a difficult time for all the students and alumni he inspired, for Molloy and for the SMILE program itself. Leo was right about one thing though: SMILE means we. After Leo's passing, others picked up the torch to continue his work. Raymond DiStephan '87, a former peer group leader under Leo, was asked to moderate SMILE and bring the program forward. Working with him were Br. Dan O'Riordan, Richard Lally '71, James Hoey, Br. Stephan Urban, and the old standbys Br. Regis, Dr. Murphy, Mrs. Murphy, Mrs. Hart, Fr. Doran, Dr. Englert, and Br. Norton. By 1999, Chris Dougherty, now a licensed social worker, began working at Molloy as a guidance counselor and SMILE moderator. Leo's work had endured and would continue to reach every student in need. It would continue to change lives.

Today, Dougherty, now the SMILE Program Director and Guidance Department Chair, is committed to carrying the program forward in the vision of its founders. He works with a

new generation of counselors including Kristen DeSantis, Rachel Galla, Ted McGuinness '81 and Jessica Pastore '04 to address the diverse needs of today's students. SMILE Weekly, a group discussion held once per week, is open to any students choosing to attend. Topics are voted on and range from current events to school related stress, to general issues teens face, and more. A SMILE Weekly discussion earlier this year focused on the protests in Ferguson, Missouri, and prompted students to talk about what these events meant for their world. SMILE DC (Dearest Child) United is a bereavement group open to students who have experienced the loss of a parent or family member. Additional SMILE groups help students dealing with social assertiveness, extraordinary circumstances at home or personally. Whatever the issue, students benefit a great deal from this wide range of SMILE meetings and leave with a renewed sense of confidence and self-worth. Alumni are also invited back to Molloy to participate in SMILE activities.

On Saturday, March 21st, SMILE celebrated its golden anniversary. 50 years of learning, helping, and growing. Over 250 guests gathered at Molloy representing past and current SMILE members, past and current faculty, Marist Brothers, living program founders and the families of SMILE's faithfully departed founders. "I meet with hundreds of prospective students and their parents each year, but because we have an enrollment of almost 1,600 students our size scares some parents," said President Richard Karsten '81 while welcoming the crowd. "My response is that we are a big school with a small school attitude, and I can say with one hundred percent confidence that no student gets lost at Molloy. It is because of programs like SMILE that no one gets lost. It's clear that SMILE has left its footprint on many of us."

A prayer service led by Br. Dan O'Riordan and featuring Br. Owen Ormsby '74 and Fr. Doran gave pause to pray for the departed SMILE



1. Chris Dougherty '91, Ray DiStephan '87, Joe Egan '89, Richard Karsten '81 & Br. James Norton '63 | 2. Mari Hart | 3. Fr. Ed Doran, Br. Dan O'Riordan '85 & Mary Michels | 4. Recent SMILE members in "The Cave" | 5. Br. Owen Ormsby '74, Shannon McLoughlin '09 & Richard Karsten '81 | 6. Vintage photos of Br. Leo Richard on display in the SMILE Museum | 7. SMILE members representing their favorite program in room 206

founders including Brothers Leo, Regis, and Ron as well as Dr. Englert, Dr. Murphy, and Mrs. Murphy. As the event program continued, Br. Norton provided remarks detailing the beginnings of SMILE. His description prominently featured the big man with the booming voice, and the mention of his passion for helping kids brought brief tears.

Ray DiStephan and Joe Egan also shared their thoughts. Yes, the same Ray DiStephan that picked up the torch in 1995. Yes, the same Joe Egan who addressed his classmates some 25 years prior. "You all have your Leo stories and your own stories. Be sure to tell them, especially at times when it is most difficult to do so. This will be your salvation. It was for me," said Ray. Joe echoed similar sentiments; "This is about honoring the past, celebrating the present and launching the program into the next 50 years. To once hear Br. Leo's voice echoing through these halls and to share his words with all of you is a dream come true."

The remainder of the evening included a reception and an invitation for guests to take a SMILE Tour around Molloy. The tour highlighted many locations the program has called home. The Cave was an obvious starting point, but other important rooms included 301, 302 and 206 (frequent homes of SMILE Weekly). Also featured was a SMILE Museum, which displayed photos, items and articles representing the past five decades.

We don't have room for all the kind words from that night, or the testimonials that were spoken or shared in print and on video, but these words from Mrs. Hart sum everything up well: "This event was fabulous. The number of people that came together was just amazing. All of my years at Molloy were wonderful, but this felt like a great culmination of that. Tonight could not have been better."

A dedicated page featuring much of our SMILE Museum content is now available for viewing at www.molloyhs.org/SMILE.