

## **Touring the Ave Maria University**

**by Trustee Mary Cicogna**

**It gives me great pleasure to report to the Board on my visit to Ave Maria University located in SW Florida, 20 miles east of Naples and in the town of Ave Maria.**

**During the summer of 2007, I, in my capacity as Vice Chair of the Board, met with two representatives from the newly constructed Catholic University named Ave Maria University. Since the university was relatively new and unknown to students in Toronto, we discussed ways of making it available as an option to Grade 12 students across the system.**

**After viewing the web-site, I discovered that this university was worth exploring and decided to visit the following year in order to get my own perspective and to see and hear for myself what students attending the university have to say about the available programs and the culture and lifestyle surrounding the university site.**

**On April 4, 2008, I sent an e-mail to Mr. Darius F. Mosun, a member of the Board of Regents, and Mr. John M. Crowley, the Senior Development Officer at AMU advising them of my decision to visit and tour the university. I also communicated my intention to staff responsible to oversee Trustees' expenditures and asked his advice regarding the policies and procedures in place governing Board business excursions. I researched the various travel web sites in order to get the best quote for flight and accommodation.**

**When in Florida, on April 13, I contacted Mr. Crowley and we agreed to meet and tour the Ave Maria University on April 15<sup>th</sup> and that at that time, I would be meeting with the Associate Director of Admissions, Mr. Michel Williams, and students from Canada attending the university.**

**Ave Maria University is founded by Mr. Tom Monaghan, an orphan and a self-made billionaire whose wish was to build a Catholic University in Detroit, Michigan. Because of difficulties in making this project a reality in Detroit, he decided to construct Ave Maria University in Florida instead. The university opened its doors on August 2007. On March 31, 2008, more than 2,200 people took part in the Dedication Mass of the parish of Ave**

**Maria Oratory. Bishop Dewane presided at the Rite of Dedication and named Fr. Robert Tatman administrator of the parish.**

**The 27,000 square foot Oratory that seats 1,100 people is situated at the center of the piazza with restaurants, shops and cafes around it forming a horseshoe effect. I was told that it was built to resemble the Basilica of Padova in Italy. An 8-foot gold leaf Celtic Cross is erected on the church and the Oratory's design is made to resemble a historical church rendered with contemporary structure, materials, and technology.**

**The university is built at the center of 17 square miles. Many new homes are also being built. It is forecasted that there would be 11,000 homes on site in 20 years. Major grocery stores like Publix have signs erected for future construction.**

**The St. John Vianney Visitor's Center is a welcome center whereby you can speak to staff, sign the visitor's book and view an introductory film for an overview of the foundation and the steps leading to the construction of the university project. You can also schedule to go on a campus tour, which leaves twice a day Monday to Friday.**

**During my tour I was taken to the Canizaro Library where many large works of art were displayed on the walls. The paintings were donated by the founder to AMU and was being sold to help pay for new construction associated with the university. Mr. Crowley pointed out to me a K-12 Prep School which was in close proximity to the Piazza, and signs erected where the future site for the second Academic Building, Administration Building, the Performing Arts Center and the Ave Maria School of Law. I was treated with lunch in the Student Union building before heading off to meet with Mr. Williams and the students from Canada.**

**I was introduced to Mr. Williams who in turn introduced me to Adam, a student from Calgary and Alicia from Oshawa. Our discussion revolved around the TCDSB and the AMU. I was told that the university accepts non-Catholic students as well, as long as they participate in the Catholic tradition, i.e., attend mass and follow the gospel teachings. Alicia spoke about the unique Catholic values being taught at the University that were lacking in her elementary and secondary schools in Oshawa. At AMU, there was a "solid Catholic core" component, one that emphasizes the value of faith. Adam was graduating this year. He particularly liked being in a class of 5 students to one professor. The freshman class has a ratio of**

**25 to one. Up to 350 new students will be attending next year. There are presently over 800 students enrolled at the AMU. Ave Maria offers bachelor's degrees in biology, classics, economics, history, literature, mathematics, music, philosophy, politics, and theology. Pre-professional programs are offered in pre-law, pre-medicine and pre-theologate and also a Certificate in Business is offered as well. Mr. Williams informed me of his willingness to visit Toronto and make presentations to students and the TCDSB in the fall of 2008. I look forward to pursuing a twinning agreement with the university and the TCDSB.**

**Scholarships are being granted to students and financial aid is available. The annual cost including tuition, housing, meal plan, technology fee and activities fee total \$23,395.00. Student aid is available and various options and resources can be discussed with staff from the Financial Aid Office.**

**On my third visit, during my stay, I noticed the licence plates on cars parked outside the Women's Student Residences and Men's Student Residences. Many of the students were from the United States (Illinois, New Hampshire, New Jersey, Minnesota, Virginia, Maryland, North Carolina, Washington, Florida, etc.) but in the mix were also some Ontario and a New Brunswick licence plate. (Photos are available upon request)**

**Soon after my return, I scheduled a meeting with Mr. Mosun, the superintendent of education and representatives from Madonna and James Cardinal McGuigan Catholic Secondary Schools. This meeting was scheduled in order to explore ways of linking the two secondary schools with AMU and providing financial aid to students that need it. Mr. Mosun agreed that it is important to experience and tour the facilities and is in discussions with Michael Williams, Associate Director of Admissions, to send a group of guidance counselors and Board representatives to visit AMU at the university's expense in the not too distant future. Discussions have not yet been finalized.**

**I have since been provided with brochures by Mr. Williams, which will be distributed to Grade 12 students attending Madonna and James Cardinal McGuigan Catholic Secondary Schools in the fall.**

**My comments:**

**In my 14 years as a Trustee in an underprivileged and vulnerable community, I meet with parents and students who on more than one**

**occasion have been refused access to higher education, i.e. college and university. These students may not excel in the strict core academics BUT are gifted in other areas such as sports and the arts. Unfortunately, our Canadian universities, unlike the American counterparts, do not value these attributes highly.**

**In fact, any opportunity to provide for scholarships and bursaries, etc., for these students has always been my main aim and objective as an elected Trustee.**

**My reasons for connecting with new universities such as Ave Maria who value Arts and Sports as well as academics is an opportunity to help the underprivileged students access higher learning, and provide them with another alternative, an option to attend a Catholic University where the climate is ideal and where students can meet and interact with other students from all over North America and possibly the world.**