

A Heart-warming Story of Tragedy, Courage, Love, and Community from
the President of the New Wyoming Catholic College

Anthony Joseph Sacco, Sr. Copyright March 2008

PINE BLUFFS – Two years ago, in April 2005, I attended a meeting in Cheyenne, WY, where Bishop David Ricken announced diocesan plans to establish a four-year Catholic College in this state. “What a super idea,” I thought doubtfully. “Too bad it’s an impossible task.”

Why did I think that? Because since 1886, the University of Wyoming had been the only college in this state offering a four-year degree. Oh, yes, there are other colleges here: Eastern Wyoming College in Torrington, Casper College, near Casper, and various Community Colleges throughout the state, such as Laramie County Community College (LCCC) in Cheyenne. But these are all schools funded by the state and supported by revenue derived from Wyoming’s vast energy resources; coal, oil, gas, and uranium, to name just a few. But to get off the ground, this new Catholic College would need to depend upon private philanthropy and donations from Roman Catholics in Wyoming and around the nation.

For the next two years I watched, fascinated, as a small group of dedicated individuals under the able leadership of Bishop Ricken and Father Robert W. Cook, planned and acted upon what, at first, had only been a glimmer of an idea; a laudable but perhaps unattainable concept.

In the fall of 2007, that dream became a reality! Based upon the Great Books program, which has become popular nationally in the last thirty years – Saint John’s in Annapolis, MD and Santa Fe, NM is an example - the new college welcomed its first freshman class last August, on 2,300 acres of land formerly known as the Broken Anvil Ranch, donated by Joe and Francie Perkins. The site, 12 miles south of Lander at the edge of the magnificent Wind River Mountain Range, is contiguous to vast federal government holdings administered by the Bureau of Land Management. The College has leased 6,300 acres of that land for a Freshman Orientation Program which will be conducted jointly, annually, by the National Outdoor Leadership School.

The stated purpose of this new college, according to its Brochure, is to “produce capable and cultivated human beings . . . designed to offer an education that forms whole persons in their three dimensions: physical, intellectual, and spiritual.” And then there’s this: “WCC will provide an abundance of opportunities for creating a rich community culture on campus. It will fortify and enrich

students in their faith, helping to establish lasting friendships, and refining their lives through art, culture, and tradition.”

“Really?” I thought. “Well it sounds nice, but isn’t that just hype, put out there to attract students to the new institution? Imagine my surprise, then, when I received this letter last month from Reverend Robert W. Cook, President of the College. It’s a heart-wrenching story of tragedy, courage, love, family, and the community of love formed, as promised, at the fledgling College. The material in italics is mine.

“February 2008

My dear friends in Christ,

Roslyn is eighteen and the oldest of the Gwilliam sisters from Jackson, Wyoming. She applied for admission to Wyoming Catholic College because as she said: ‘I wanted to grow stronger in my faith and learn to live a full life.’ As part of the College admission process, Roslyn wrote an essay on her other goals in which she said that ‘one of the benefits of attending WCC is to learn to express myself clearly.’ She noted that ‘too many kids I know speak, write and feel in random fragments that seem to reflect their distracted lives. I want to be an articulate speaker and good writer who tries to understand the deeper meaning of real things.’

Roslyn grew up in a family full of love and confidence. ‘My Mom is not only my home-school teacher but also my best friend.’ In addition to her studies, Roslyn enjoys 4-H activities, barrel racing, teaching CCD [now Faith Formation] classes, and volunteering at a local homeless shelter. ‘I love to go hunting with my father,’ Roslyn said. ‘It gets us out on the horses into God’s country and gives us some one-on-one time.’

Over the years, Roslyn’s father, Dr. Tim Gwilliam, built a successful veterinary practice in Jackson, Wyoming. Whenever he could, Tim would take his daughters into the mountains to scout and hunt. ‘Dad wasn’t big into putting trophies on the wall,’ according to his oldest daughter. ‘Instead, with seven kids to feed, he liked to put meat in the freezer.’ However, Roslyn’s father did keep his best elk ivories for something special. When each of his girls turned sixteen, he would give them a custom-made elk ivory ring.

Roslyn loved her father’s quiet confidence. He worked hard and poured his energy in[to] his family, faith and friends. During tough times, Roslyn remembers how her father would gather his family around the long dinner table that he built with his own hands. ‘He’d bring us all back to basics – family, our love for each other and our faith in God.’ Tim Gwilliam also had a number of little family

traditions that his daughters loved. 'Each time that Dad left his family, he would trace the Sign of the Cross on our forehead and say 'God be with you.'

On Saturday, January 28, the Feast of St. Thomas Aquinas, Father Robert Cook, WCC President told students at the College Mass that he'd like everyone at the College to pray for the Gwilliam family. He explained that on January 26, the Feast of St. Timothy, Dr. Gwilliam had died in a terrible accident at his clinic. Earlier that day, Dr. Tim was by himself quartering a horse after performing an autopsy. While making an incision, he slipped and cut through his own femoral artery.

Tim died within minutes while wearing the same brown scapular that his wife had given him over twenty years ago on their wedding day. The students, faculty and staff of Wyoming Catholic College offered Masses for the family, praying also for the repose of the soul of Dr. Gwilliam.

On February 1, First Friday Devotion to the Sacred Heart, with sadness and also with strong faith, the Gwilliam family brought Tim's body to Our Lady of the Mountains [Roman] Catholic Church in Jackson where they had worshipped faithfully for nearly two decades. The church was packed for the funeral Mass. Tim's pastor, Father Joe Geders, described Tim as a man like St. John Bosco 'who put the care and education of his beautiful family above all else.' It was not surprising, then, that the family asked that in lieu of flowers, memorials be sent to Wyoming Catholic College where a Scholarship Fund has been established in honor of Dr. Tim Gwilliam.

Roslyn recalled that just before her father's death, he shared with her that he had never felt stronger in his faith or closer to god. In the fall, Tim purchased seven journals. He spent two weeks on each journal, writing ten pages of love to each of his daughters. At Christmas, Tim put them in their stockings. He wrote to one of his daughters, 'Just know that I'll always love you, through thick and thin, good and bad. I might not always seem to understand, but I'll always keep trying.'

After the funeral, Roslyn told her mother that as the oldest child she might want to postpone college in order to help care for her sisters. Her mother looked quietly at her and said, 'What do you think your father would say?' Roslyn looked a little puzzled. Her mother reached over and traced the Sign of the Cross on her forehead, whispering, 'God be with you.'

Roslyn said, 'God gave me the gift of our faith and I can't imagine my life without it. His gift has given me strength during this very sad time. I cannot imagine my life without my dad. But he would want me to continue on and do my best. He taught me that. And I will.'

Roslyn will visit the College in March when she will meet the other students, stay in a dorm, attend daily Mass and sit in on classes. 'The WCC student body acts a little like an extended family,' according to Dr. Mitchell Kilpakgian, the College's humanities professor, who has written extensively about the beauty and mystery of family life. 'We have here a true community built on faith and love and so I expect that these students will help Roslyn get through these tough times.'

Please join the entire community of faculty, staff, and students at Wyoming Catholic College in prayers for Dr. Tim, the whole Gwilliam family, and especially Roslyn as she will soon take her next step in the journey of life this fall at our college.

In Christ,

Rev. Robert W. Cook
President"

Two years ago, I became so excited by this wonderful new plan for a Roman Catholic College which would teach traditional Catholic Christian values steeped in Western Culture to college-age kids, that I eagerly watched the school's progression from idea to reality, even traveling to the site – which is so beautiful it rivals the site of the U.S. Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs – sending its brochures to everyone I knew on both east and west coasts who had teen-agers, and contributing a portion of our family tithe, on occasion, to its support. Indeed, the conviction formed in me that had such a school existed when my own kids were of college age, I'd have sent them there.

Perhaps I cannot expect that many others will be so struck by this dream, as I have been, that they will open their wallets and purses. But, in this time when desperate, dispirited youngsters on college and university campuses across America are showing their complete alienation and disillusionment with an increasingly secularistic college experience, to the point of violence against their fellow students and themselves, can we not at least recognize the need for such a place?

Father Cook again: "All students at the Wyoming Catholic College benefit from scholarship funds. Nearly half the cost of each WCC student's education is supplemented by these scholarships and by other non-tuition income."

Okay, so now you know where I'm going with this. Yes, I know that in addition to our own local parish church there are many charities clamoring for our contributions. And yes, I understand that our funds are finite – that we also need to support ourselves and our families – within our limited means. But I can't

conceive of a better use for my money than to donate a bit of it to such a worthy cause. What about you?

To see more about this College, go online to www.wyomingcatholiccollege.com. And to contribute to the newly-formed Dr. Tim Gwilliam Scholarship Fund, or to support the college generally, you can send your contribution to Wyoming Catholic College, P.O. Box 750, 163 Leedy Drive, Lander, WY 82520.