

Sharing Our Marianist Stories Ep. 36 Transcript

The Responsibility of Stewardship (with Laura Koonce, Jon Watase, and Mike Bennett)

00:01 - Jon Watase

I owe so much to the Marianist Family, because even on this trip I saw so many parallels, and how I was raised and then what came to be today. On this trip, I ran into Mr. [Earl?] Christian and Earl Christian is the man who showed me who Jesus was. And I think without meeting him in 9th grade, and having him be my religion teacher, I would have never been in the position that I'm in, apparently.

00:31 - Mike Bennett

Welcome to *Sharing Our Marianist Stories*, a podcast produced by the North American Center for Marianist Studies in Dayton, Ohio. I'm Mike Bennett, Media Administrator for NACMS. This episode of *Sharing Our Marianist Stories* features an interview recorded at the 2023 Lay Assembly in St. Louis with Laura Koonce and Jon Watase who both live in Hawaii and work at Saint Louis School, a Marianist school serving boys in kindergarten through 12th grade that shares a campus with Chaminade University in Honolulu. Founded in 1846, Saint Louis School is the only all-male day school in Hawaii. The school engages numerous aspects of blended learning, including 'Aina-based learning, which is a form of place-based learning focused on the intersection of land, stewardship, and culture. Laura shares more about how she sees 'Aina-based learning in practice, especially through the gardening and environmental efforts Jon has helped initiate at the school. Laura and Jon helped me learn quite a bit about Saint Louis School and how their own lives have been impacted by their experiences of the Marianists and Saint Louis School. Without further ado, let's turn it over to Laura and John to share their Marianist story.

01:54 - Laura Koonce

My name is Laura. I'm based out of Honolulu. I work at Saint Louis school in Kaimuki on Kalaepohaku, and I am an administrator and a former teacher. I've been there about seven or eight years.

02:06 - Jon Watase

My name is Jon Watase. I'm from Kaneohe, Hawaii. The school that I work at is Saint Louis, Hawaii on Oahu. I'm a former student of Saint Louis, and now I teach agriculture.

02:17 - Mike Bennett

Laura, what brought you to Hawaii and Saint Louis School?

02:21 - Laura Koonce

Oh, it's a really long story. I'll try to think of the short version. So, and I'm sorry, Jon, I know you've heard this like a million times. I am originally from Omaha, Nebraska, and I studied

abroad in college in Austria, which is part of my heritage, and learned about Austria and central Europe, and how my family came to Austria. But then I was also exposed to a group of individuals in Austria that were not given citizenship, were not legally allowed to work, and it really opened my eyes to a lot of things that I had been sheltered from. And so that kind of led me down a path of volunteering in the city where I was, in Omaha, when I went back. And then a week after I graduated college, I joined the Peace Corps, and I moved to Micronesia, and I stayed there about four years. The island that I was staying was called Yap, and the people in Yap are very connected to nature. There's a word called ["chakawili"], which I think is very close to the Hawaiian word Mālama. And it just talks about how life is so precious, and we have to care for it. We have to care for the land, the earth, the sea, the birds in the air. So, when my husband and I decided to start a family, we moved to Hawaii because he had gone to college there, and my family wanted us in the US closer. So, I was able to kind of apply what I had learned on the island of Yap, that responsibility piece... And when I worked at Saint Louis, it was just so wonderful. I learned so much about 'Aina-based learning, about the Marianist charism, and I just saw so many connections between the two.

03:54 - Mike Bennett

Earlier in the Assembly, we were talking, Jon, about how you initiated and implemented the agricultural program at Saint Louis School. Can you talk more about that process and what the program looks like?

04:07 - Jon Watase

Our agriculture program started three years ago as a volunteer program with my classmates. It happened out of Covid [Pandemic] because of need. Hawaii has one of the highest rates of imports for food. We import 80-90% of our food supply. So, we needed to figure out a way that we could teach the next generation how important it is that we grow food sustainably. So, Mr. Timothy Los Banos was my teacher at Saint Louis School, and now he's actually the principal. And during Covid, I asked him was it okay to start the program? And he was ecstatic about it, actually. He loves nature, and he's pretty much the reason I work at the school now. He gave me the opportunity to show people what I love to do.

05:01 - Jon Watase

So, I'm actually a full-time farmer on Oahu, and it just kind of naturally and organically grew itself into what it is. It started as we met every Saturday, we fixed up the school, and then we built like a small garden area. And that was just like taking out trash and restarting that and regenerating that spot. And then it grew into now it's a full curriculum from K [Kindergarten] through [Grade] 12. We do zero waste composting. We grow hundreds of pounds of food on campus, and we also removed 6000 pounds of trash, 10,000 invasive fish from our stream. And we do beach cleanups. Yeah, it's a really diverse program now, and it's grown into this amazing

thing, but it took a lot of time and so many volunteers. I'm just the guy who is there now, but it's built on so many different people.

05:58 Mike Bennett

So how is the food that is grown used?

06:01 - Jon Watase

So currently, we do small cooking classes, because we don't have facilities. So, we do like pickling, and then we also let kids take food home for their families. We don't have enough production for everybody to eat stuff. But if you have an area, that class takes home whatever you grow. It's really diverse because it'll be regular vegetables like lettuce, tomatoes, beans, and then... it'll go into like *lilikoi* which is passion fruit, papaya, so many different things that we just try to show the kids like this is something different. One thing that they really like is Swiss chard because it's super colorful. But we just try to explain to them that food doesn't come from the supermarket, that it comes from the ground, and that we can grow it.

06:50 - Mike Bennett

Laura, what impact have you seen this agricultural program have on the school overall?

06:56 - Laura Koonce

I met Jon when I was the Grants Coordinator, and so I'm really enthusiastic about what we call 'Aina-based learning, or place-based learning. And I had the opportunity to learn about what Jon was doing and champion him in his efforts and Mr. Los Banos. But I think it's really important the work he's doing, and it's connected to the Marianist charism, definitely with *Laudato Si'*. Because we have students - and Jon has mentioned this before - that they're not aware that food comes from the ground or they're aware, but they're not really into that process. They've never seen it. And Jon teaches the students how to fish for the first time out of the stream, and that's a really wonderful experience to connect the students to the land and start to get them thinking at a young age about creation and stewardship of the land.

07:44 - Laura Koonce

So, we have a word in Hawaii, *Kuleana*, responsibility. There's a bigger meaning to it, but it essentially means "responsibility." And so, they learn about that and how, as people, we are responsible for the land that we occupy. And I think that's just such a great piece that Jon connects the kids to in his work. We have a diverse population at Saint Louis School, like about 63% of our students identify as Native Hawaiian. But then, we have students that are not Native Hawaiian, and it's a really great connector for all of our students... For example, I'm not Native Hawaiian, but 'Aina-based learning and being connected to the land is a way to root me in the land and to expose me to Hawaiian culture. So, I think it's really important for our students that are also not Native Hawaiian, because we teach them that, "Yes, you may not be born here or

you may not be an indigenous person, but this is where you are. And we respect the culture where we are, and we learn about it, and we embrace it, and we take care of it.”

08:47 - Laura Koonce

I just really want to emphasize the great work that's happening at Saint Louis School. And we have other things going on with our teachers and with our campus ministry, but I'm really enthusiastic about what Mr. Los Banos and our 'Aina-based learning team and Jon are doing with using God's creation as a vehicle to teach all of these lessons. There's so many... I mean, you could talk about science and talk about math, but then also you can really get into the Bible. I mean, you had a mustard seed lesson. There's so many things. It's just such a great context and being in Hawaii makes it so easy. We're surrounded by beauty and amazing people to have those types of discussions, but I just feel like our teachers and Jon do such a wonderful job engaging the students in that.

09:36 - Mike Bennett

How has the Marianist charism or Marianist Family nourished each of your lives?

09:44 - Laura Koonce

For me, I wasn't Catholic coming to Saint Louis School. My husband and his whole family was, so they were excited. So, I learned about the Marianist charism and just slowly started listening. I would take my students to Mass and participate, and then... I just kind of fell in love with it and decided, “I think this is for me.” So, I actually did meet with the Campus Ministry at Chaminade [University]. I was taking classes at Chaminade and was able to become Catholic. For me, it was the care for creation piece, I think, that kind of first hooked me in, and then I learned about everything else.

10:25 - Jon Watase

Going to Saint Louis is the reason why I do all the things I do today currently. I owe so much to the Marianist Family because even on this trip, I saw so many parallels and how I was raised and then what came to be today. On this trip I ran into Mr. Earl Christian, and Earl Christian is the man who showed me who Jesus was. And I think without meeting him in ninth grade and having to be my religion teacher, I would have never been in the position that I'm in currently. If I had never found out who Jesus was, I would be a totally different person, and I don't even know where my life would be at. And because of Mr. Christian, I was able to go to college. I was able to understand the responsibility to help others, and that if I'm going to be here, I might as well share love like Jesus did. And it really impacted me in a way where I was doing retreats at the end of my senior year, teaching others about who Jesus was, and it's something that I carry with me every day of my life.

11:32 - Jon Watase

I go to church still because of this school. I grew up going to church, but it was never anything really serious. I didn't really read the Bible ever. And I considered to have a Bible, and then I read it, and I think that's because of the infrastructure at Saint Louis. [It was the] gift for my life. It was a really big eye opener for me, and I can't thank the Marianists at Saint Louis enough. And I think working at the school, telling other kids about, "There's this guy, his name is Jesus. He could probably help you out whatever is going on in your life, if it's good, if it's bad. It's because of him." And we always pray. Before our classes we pray. During our classes, we have lessons tied in with the Bible. And I think it's really important that people know that Jesus is still around today and that he's present every day in our lives. And I honestly don't think that without Saint Louis School or the Marianists I wouldn't know that. I would just be a guy. I don't even know what I'd be doing. I definitely probably would be working with the earth. Yeah, the Marianists have truly impacted my life.

12:40 - Mike Bennett

As we finish up our time at this Lay Assembly, I'm curious to learn what's one thing that each of you might carry with you from this experience?

12:50 - Laura Koonce

For me, I'm not part of an official Lay Marianist group yet, and I have visited a few, and I think that's something important. For me, at the time when I was visiting, it was just like, "Oh, I'm doing my MBA. I have my kids... I can't take anything else on." But I know it's something that I want to do, so I have some wheels turning on some things that I definitely want to do. But for me, being here, it was just really wonderful. It was so easy. It was so fluid to be here, and everybody is so inviting. But not just inviting, they're also engaged and accepting, accepting of people of where you are. And I think that's a really big piece of being Marianist - and also at Saint Louis School - that we see. We meet people where they are without judgment, and where you are on your path, "That's great! Let's walk together." And I think that's really beautiful. So, I just had such a wonderful experience, and there were some really big issues that we talked about over this weekend. But everybody was so joyful, and these topics are not always fun to discuss or think about. But I think everybody approached them with such love that it was just a really beautiful thing to be a part of.

14:04 - Jon Watase

Something I'll take away from this weekend, this year for me is going to be a really big year, moving into a larger role at the school. So, having this confidence right before school starts, it was just the biggest blessing because it showed me how big that God is in my life. And the reason that happened was, again, bring it back to seeing Mr. Christian. I haven't seen Mr. Christian since I graduated high school, and I was never able to thank him for how much he

impacted me. And I never really understood how much he impacted me until this trip, really, because seeing him again, it brought back so many old memories and gratitude and joy.

14:44 – Jon Watase

And having that feeling going into this next year, I can hopefully give that same thing to somebody else. I can hopefully let somebody else know who Jesus is through the work that I do. And I always tell the kids that they should go to *Kairos* or *Emmaus* [11th and 12th grade retreats], because I was a jerk before, and things are a lot different. I found out who God was and how great my family is through those experiences. And without that, again, I'd be different. So, this experience coming here, it was all these God moments happened. Everything kind of fell into place. We learned so [many] great things. And then, me and Laura were able to go to this amazing charity event where we got onto the lake, saw bald eagles, and they planted trees. It's the things I would love to do anywhere. And I think that's the biggest part about this retreat... God is so present everyday in my life and in everybody's life. And it just reminded me about the way that I should be taking on educating the next generation. I think before this retreat I was kind of in summer mode still, but now I'm like ready to go, ready to get back to school and work on the things that we've been doing because it was a perfect timing, I think.

16:07 - Mike Bennett

Before we hear Laura and Jon's responses to our concluding question, I'd like to offer them a word of thanks for sharing their Marianist story, particularly how their experiences of the Marianist Saint Louis School and the most recent Lay Assembly have nourished their lives. So, thanks, Laura and Jon. And a word of thanks to you, our listener, for listening to this episode of *Sharing Our Marianist Stories* and for your continued support of the North American Center for Marianists Studies. Make sure to follow us wherever you listen to podcasts so that you'll be notified when we have future episodes released. And follow us on our social media accounts @ThisisNACMS on Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube so that you have access to our ongoing educational and formational content focused on our Marianist Family, history, and charism. And now, to wrap up this episode of *Sharing Our Marianist Stories*, we return with our final question. We know that the Marianist Founders corresponded via letter writing. So, if you were going to write a letter to anyone, dead or alive, and be guaranteed a response, who would you write to, and what would be the topic?

17:27 - Laura Koonce

I think, I would write to my grandmother, Takoko, because I never really got to know her. She passed away when I was, I think, in my early teens, maybe it was like 12 or something. And something - a conversation that I started when I went to Dayton for the MSJC Integral Ecology team meeting was looking back on our ancestral stories, and our ancestors can also include the Founders of Marianists. Those are our ancestors as well. And so, I think my grandmother, she struggled. She came to the United States after World War II, and my mom found letters that she

wrote to my grandfather when he was deployed. And I just know she struggled so much, and I would just really love to thank her and acknowledge her, and then hear some more of her stories. Because I think we can find strength in those stories, and it can help move us forward in our lives.

18:25 - Jon Watase

That's a tough one... because there's so many people that I'd like to write a letter to. But most people that I know, I can write them letters now. So, you're telling me something. I should write somebody a letter *today*. Yeah, I should write a letter to my parents, though, and just thank them. Thank them for giving me an opportunity to be here, like the sacrifices they gave me such a long time ago. And to come to Saint Louis and to send me to a good school so I'd go to college. And I don't think I've ever written them a letter thanking them about that. And I definitely wouldn't be here without them, too. And I think that's a good part about this retreat is it made me take a step back and see where I used to be, and how God's affected my life and the path that he's really made for me. And yeah, definitely need to write a letter on the plane to my parents, thanking them about how incredible my life is because of them.