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Providence, Gratitude, Service

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When 2009 Lackner honoree Joseph Saliba talks about his 32 years at the University of Dayton, it is apparent that he believes in providence and is driven by gratitude and a call to serve.

Providence

For Saliba, signs seemed to point to this Marianist institution. When Saliba was born in Lebanon, his grandmother prayed for the intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mother, for Saliba's own mother had lost another child just a short time before. As a boy, he accompanied his mother to Marian shrines to pray where Mary herself had prayed. And later, as a young man trying out for a soccer team in Bordeaux, France, he regularly walked right by the Madeleine, where Father William Joseph Chaminade had co-founded the Society of Mary's first lay faith community. While there at Christmastime in 1976, he also visited Lourdes. Though more than 5 million people make pilgrimages there, Saliba recalls, "I had the whole shrine to myself."

"I promised the Blessed Mother that I would one day return with my children," he said. Years later he fulfilled that vow with his three children, Elias, Maria and David.

Though Saliba cites many reasons for coming to UD, the most powerful one, he said, was his faith in the same Mother Mary to whom his grandmother once prayed.

Gratitude

When Saliba arrived at UD, his English was rudimentary, he said. But seeing potential and a strong work ethic - Saliba had 17 hours of credit awarded in advance and registered for or tested out of another 27 credit hours of calculus, differential equations, chemistry, physics, statics, strength of materials and philosophy that first summer — his professors were accommodating.

"The hardest course for me was business ethics," he said. "I didn't understand a word, and my first paper was terrible. But when my professor asked me where I was from and I said Lebanon, he immediately began speaking French to me. … After every class, he went over the whole of the material in French, and he permitted me to write all of my papers in French. That was my introduction to Marianist education, an introduction that made UD home for me." Other professors and Marianists helped in similar ways.

"People all across this campus went beyond the call of duty to help me out — every single person, without exception," he said. "I had a custom-made education. At the time I thought this was extraordinary; I soon learned that this was just how the Marianists gave of themselves."

Service

Since 1977, Saliba's work at UD has been both diverse and dynamic, said visual arts professor Sean Wilkinson, Graul Chair in Arts and Languages, who team-taught an interdisciplinary course with Saliba for several years in the Humanities Fellows program. Saliba's been a student, a grounds and kitchen worker, a graduate student, a faculty member, a department chair, a dean and an interim provost.

"He doesn't look at any of his work as a job," Wilkinson said. "To him, it's service. … Joe is exemplary in the way he brings other people into a conversation, and he understands that it's a much richer and rewarding conversation when you bring other perceptions to it. …"

"It would be hard," Wilkinson said, "to find anyone else so thoroughly devoted to the University."