

Conor

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Professor Clauss

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Abandon All Hope Ye Who Enter Here (Revised Edition)

“NO IRISH NEED APPLY” is printed on the sign outside his office door. He hates the British, Aurora Christian, and of course sleepy Marmion students. He is Jim Newport, an imposing looking, six-foot-four, Irish Catholic, seventy year old hulk of a man. Mr. Newport taught my U.S. History class during my junior of high school at Marmion Academy, an all-boys Catholic school west of Chicago. As a freshman, I trembled with fear at the hulking size and booming voice of Mr. Newport, or “Newps” as we liked to call him. My fear returned as I walked into his class on the first day of my junior year. On the projector screen was a picture of a sign reading “Abandon All Hope Ye Who Enter Here.” That sign had me scared again, but over the next year in his class my feelings about him would change dramatically. Mr. Newport became the most interesting and fascinating teacher I’ve ever had.

After all of his years at the school, Mr. Newport has achieved near mythic status at Marmion. He has been teaching and coaching on and off at Marmion since the 1960’s and has become an icon among the student body. Countless stories fuel his legend. In one, Newport became so angry with a student that he picked up the podium and threw it at the wall in the front of the classroom. Another wild tale has “Newps” throwing a student out of a window. I don’t know whether these stories are true, but I wouldn’t doubt any of them. Because of his iconic status, the Marmion students honor Mr. Newport at one basketball game each season. The student section dresses in his usual “outfit” consisting of a sweater vest, khakis, and a watch

worn somewhere near the elbow. For decades to come, Marmion students will reminisce about the legendary Mr. Newport.

One feature that was quite distinctive about Mr. Newport was his willingness to play along with the class. Every day in Newport's class started the same way. An assigned student would lead the class in prayer and then go up to the podium and share a current event. Then Newport would go around the class to hear "current events" from the rest of the class. Most of these "current events" had nothing to do with the actual news. In fact, many of them were entirely fabricated. One student would always give updates on the Bear Wrestling World Championships in Canada; another would give a score update on the nonexistent Marmion archery team. At the time, I couldn't figure out why Newport would always play along with it. He knew that we were trying to cut into actual class time, but he let our charade continue. On most days, he would go to the notes after five minutes, but there were those great (and rare) days when current events consumed an entire forty five minute class period. It may seem like a strange method, but Mr. Newport's willingness to play along with the class helped us to focus on days when we had to get through a lot of material.

Some of the funniest days in Mr. Newport's class were the days when we had a quiz or the day after a test had been graded. Mr. Newport would make joke after joke about how bad our grades were, never to anyone personally just the class as a whole. The reason our grades were so bad was because Mr. Newport was surprisingly a difficult teacher. Two to three days a week we were given a five question quiz over the reading assigned from the night before. The textbook bolded vocabulary words, but of course the quizzes did not cover those words. Mr. Newport would purposely find the most obscure names and places in the chapter, and those would be the subject matter for the quizzes. For example, we were once asked the name of the first woman to

be executed by the U.S. government. None of us knew at the time that it was Mary Surratt, but to this day I will always remember that obscure fact. At the end of each quiz Mr. Newport would laugh as each of us groaned when the correct answer was revealed. The tests occurred every two weeks, but would be over about thirty pages of notes. The day after the test, Newport would sit on his desk and make jokes about how bad our grades were. He'd shake his head and say things like "And just when I thought you Cadets could read, boy was I wrong." Or he'd say "With these grades, I may just have to quit and head over to the Phoenix Club [a seedy local bar]." It wouldn't seem to make sense that a teacher who is so willing to waste time is also one of the most difficult, but that was Jim Newport.

Most teachers like to inject some humor into class to make things more interesting and liven up the mood. However, most teachers aren't very funny, Mr. Newport on the other hand, was hilarious. For instance, every time someone had the top button of their collar unbuttoned he would say "Oh I didn't realize it was California day in here." If someone got up in the middle of class he would say "Is it anarchy week at the Academy?" Newport also loved to go on tangents or more accurately rants, about rival high schools. He especially loved to rip on our rivals from Aurora Christian (an Evangelical Christian school). One day we came into class and on the projector screen we read the words "The Christians suck canal water." We had never really heard nor understood what this insult meant, but we still loved it. He would sarcastically comment that God wanted Aurora Christian to win the football game because "God loves the Christians." He would always end his rants about Aurora Christian by saying "Remember, we're not Christian, we're Catholic." Mr. Newport's quirky jokes and irreverent jabs at rival schools always left us laughing and leaving class with smiles on our faces.

As a descendant of Irish immigrants, I've always been very proud of my heritage, and Mr. Newport was no different. He would always beam with pride telling us about how his family came to the United States from Ireland in the late 1800's and the struggles they faced when they arrived here. Thus explaining the sign outside his office door. On St. Patrick's Day he showed our class the film *Michael Collins* about the leader of the Irish Revolution. Although it had nothing to do with U.S. History, Mr. Newport wanted us to appreciate the history of Ireland. He loved to hear me tell stories about my trip to Dublin and would occasionally tell stories of his own two week trip to Ireland. Our shared heritage and love of history gave us a lot of things to discuss. Somebody who I had initially been afraid of had become someone who I could always have a conversation with.

By the end of my junior year, I had discovered that although Mr. Newport seemed tough and even mean on the outside, he was a truly nice man. The best example of his generosity would have to be the change that he made to my grade at the end of junior year. I had always been a good history student, however I was ill in the first part of the second semester and fell behind in the class. Due to this I received a 'D' on our first test and had to work my way back up to a mid-level 'B' for my mid-term grade. The second half of that semester I still needed to get a high 'A' in order to have any chance to get the grade I wanted. I fell a little bit short, and I only scored a 90% on the final exam. After that, I assumed to see a B+ when my grade appeared online. When I finally worked up the courage to check I was shocked to see that I had received an A-. Next to the grade the word (adjusted) was written in parentheses. The grade and the comment nearly brought me to tears. Mr. Newport appreciated my passion for his class (or my Irish roots) and thought that I deserved an 'A', even though I may not have gotten a high enough percentage. I never asked Mr. Newport about his act of kindness when I saw him senior year, but

he always gave me a big smile, because he knew how much I appreciated his gesture. After this happened, I knew he was the best person to write my college recommendation and he gladly accepted my request. I realized through this experience that although he never expressed it through words, Mr. Newport cared for me.

Next year, Mr. Newport will only teach part time at Marmion because of his advancing age. I understand that it is difficult to teach at such an old age, but future Marmion students are really going to miss out. In twenty years when I look back on high school, my first memories will go back to Mr. Newport and his class in room G-13. After all of the current events, quizzes, jokes, tangents, and crazy stories are over, Marmion will be losing a true legend. I will share stories with my family for years to come about an interesting character who truly cared for me.