Cambria County Principals Association
19th Annual Super Conference
May 2, 2012
Keynote: President Tom Foley

Good morning and congratulations on your selection by your principals for this leadership conference.

President Harry Truman was a strict follower of the three B's of Public Speaking: Be Brilliant, Be Brief, and Be Seated. Can't promise the first, but I'll work hard to honor the last two of his "Bs."

I want to leave you with three sets of thoughts today, and they all have to do with your theme for the day--leadership:

- First, a few thoughts about the true nature of leadership in a sometimes cloudy world
- Second, a quick list of five rules of the road for you to ponder on your path to leadership
- Third, I want to finish with a parable of sorts, building on the biblical story of Noah and his Ark.

**First, a few thoughts on the nature of leadership.** If you google “leadership,” you will come up with an extraordinary array of “lists of the qualities of leaders”—and you will find words on those lists like “strength,” “wisdom,” “perseverance,” “intelligence,” and more. I would like to focus a few moments on three words that you will not find on any of those lists—but words that underline leadership as our students try to practice it here at Mt Aloysius. Those words are passion, compassion and community.

**First word, “passion.”**

Leadership is rarely anymore about noise, or even about fine speeches delivered by eloquent orators in the nick of time. Leadership is rarely any more about boisterous courage exhibited in the heat of battle (in modern warfare, we hardly ever even see the enemy). Occasionally, and there are great examples of each, but rarely is leadership any of those examples anymore. Leadership these days is often quieter, less about the pomp and circumstance, more about the preparation and the perspiration, the delivery, the example and most of all the end result.

A wise old coach, asked by a reporter if her team had the “will to win,” shook off the question by saying that “the will to win doesn’t matter a lick if you don’t have the will to prepare.” She said that the “will to win” on game day won’t count for much if you haven’t demonstrated the same commitment in the days leading up to the game—what she called “the will to prepare.”
It is that “will to prepare” that demonstrates deep passion for the cause, true commitment to the celebration, real appetite for the learning, focused intent on the outcome—and true leadership ability.

So, leadership begins with passion—passion that leads you

- To get up at 5:30 on a Saturday to make the trip to a homeless shelter
- To show up early for high school play nights to help get the mikes and props all set up
- To design the leaflets that generate donations for Haiti, for the food bank, or the blood drive
- To practice your remarks for public speaking class until even your parents ask you to stop
- To be on time for every single team practice, event, class and date

This morning, we encourage you to show passion for your causes, to demonstrate that collective “will to prepare”—qualities that I suspect most of you have already and which led to your selection by your principals.

So, leadership these days is not so much about noise as it is about passion—the passion that involves seeing a problem, diagnosing a cause, identifying a cure and implementing a solution. The leadership is in all four steps, but it is mostly in implementing the cure—marshaling the human, physical and monetary capital to get the job—whatever that job is—done. Done right and done well. So leadership in a real sense is passion for a cause—whether that cause is a student government election, a victory on the playing field, or a service project at the local veterans hospital.

**Second word, “compassion.”** At Mt Aloysius, it is almost married to the first word—passion. I think it has something to do with our founding principles of mercy and justice, service and hospitality. Celebrating “faith with learning,” combining “competence with compassion”—those are the key phrases in our mission statement.

Mother Teresa once said “Do not wait for leaders. Do it alone, person to person.” Sometimes leadership is doing the right thing all by your lonesome, because it is the right thing to do.

An Australian astronomy professor liked to finish his semester lecturing on the mysteries of the universe by reminding his students that they “wouldn’t go far wrong in life if they remembered two things. First, all the potential of the universe is inside you. Second, it is inside every other human being as well.”

Some of your teachers and guidance counselors and principals could have taught that class, and some of you are preparing for that same assignment. It is important to have some sense of the awesome potential of the universe, but our time on the planet is also about the potential in every single human being, especially the least among us.
Kindness is truly the universal language. And compassion is a key element of leadership. United States Marines never leave a buddy behind, dead or alive. All these examples—Mother Teresa, the Australian astronomy professor, the Marines—all go to the same point—a sense of compassion is definitely a part of leadership.

**Third word, probably my very favorite word, “community.”**

Teddy Roosevelt understood that we can’t all save the world—at least not every day—or win famous battles like he did on more than a couple of occasions. When asked about the contrast between his larger than life accomplishments and “just plain, ordinary folks,” Roosevelt’s response was characteristically terse and wise. He said that “you do what you can, with what you have, where you are.”

Pretty good maxim, and pretty good description of what real leadership is—in the big disasters that I worked on with the Red Cross, in the little unsettling happenings that occur right next door. More people’s lives are changed every day because people “do what they can with what they have where they are”—than with all the big speeches and big ideas that you can fit in the WSJ, the Congressional Record or any political party platform.

I worked with a tiny woman during my two years in war torn Belfast Northern Ireland. Mairead was less than 5 feet tall, she weighed about 80 ponds dripping wet, she had less than an eighth grade education. Her father was a humble window washer, her mother raised 8 children. When she won the Nobel Peace Prize—arguably the single greatest honor on the planet—someone asked her how she “saved” Northern Ireland. And she said—I didn’t save my country and I didn’t set out to “save” Northern Ireland. I just went out to try and make my neighbor’s life a little better, and then the neighbor next to her, and the next and the next, etc.

Her message was that for her it was all about “community,” and if what she did in her community made things better in the next and the next and the next after that—all the better. But she never set out to save the world—just to make life better in her own part of the world. She did what she could with what she had where she was. And I think we’d all say that was good enough.

Those are my thoughts—a bit unconventional—on the true nature of leadership in a sometimes troubled world. In the end, true, effective leadership has those three elements—passion, compassion and community—at its core.

Now let me turn your attention to five quick rules for the road—some guideposts as you navigate the path to leadership or just your path in your still very young lives. I call these rules the golden rule, the knockdown rule, the rocks rule, the fruit rule and the 12 ounce rule.

**Let’s start with the golden rule**—do unto others as you would have them do unto you. It has as much to do with leadership as anything else I will tell you this morning. That applies to roommates, classmates, staff mates and teachers. Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. Respect breeds respect, and kindness always comes back in multiples. And it’s okay
if—sometimes--you have to follow what they call the golden rule for a tarnished age: “be fair with others, but keep after them until they are fair with you.” That works too.

**Rule number two—the knockdown rule,** as in “it’s not how many times you get knocked down, it’s how many times you got back up.” Everybody fails—every single body on the planet. The question is do you get back up and what do you do when you are standing tall—and not slouching low. Anybody here have a favorite baseball player? Well Ted Williams in the best season for a hitter in modern baseball, hit .406. that means he got on base with a base hit four of every ten times he came to the plate. But that also he==means he didn’t get on base the other six times—does that mean he “failed” those six times? Let me assure you that is not how Ted Williams saw it!! What it does mean is that he got knocked down, figuratively, those six times, and then got back out there and had the best season at the plate in the history of the game

How about basketball—who is the greatest female player who ever lived? I am partial to someone you never heard of, but you might have seen the movie about her life. It’s called “The Mighty MACs,” and it is the story of how her little college with barely 500 students won three national championships in a row, she became the player of the year and the greatest coach you never knew—won 70% of her games as a coach, 19 NCAA tournaments, three final fours, and a national championship—first woman to play and coach a national champion. Her name is Theresa Shenk Grentz, and she was the best player on the planet in 1976, when she won her last national title as a player.

My wife Michele played with Theresa in high school, and against her in college, so I have a bit of an inside view. And Theresa was a remarkably good shooter for her time, but she too missed 6 out of 10 times she put the ball in the air. Does that make her a bad player or a failure? Of course not, she was the “Player of the Year” in America that year. It just meant she got knocked down, not knocked out. For Theresa, the most important shot is always not the last one you took, but the “next one.”

Some people make fun of country music, but nobody chronicles failure and the power of redemption any better than C&W singers. I like Dolly Parton’s line best—she sings that she “never tried quitting and never quit trying.”

And that is all we are going to ask of you as leaders and as role models for your classmates. Don’t stop trying—that’s the knockdown rule.

**Rule number three—the rocks rule.** Did you ever go for a hike, and have a small pebble struck in your shoe. Don’t want to stop to take it out, you hope it will move off to the side, you just don’t want to stop doing what you are doing—keeping up with your friends. Well, in life that happens all the time—you get pebbles in your shoes, you get rocks in the road or worse than that, boulders coming down the mountainside and they are after you personally.

I want to remind you that "if you find a path in life with no obstacles in it, the chances are it doesn’t lead anywhere." Country singer Carl Perkins puts it a little differently. He sings "if the bed didn't have any rocks in it, the stream wouldn't have any song."
Yes, there will continue to be tough times where "all hands on deck" is the only effective managing principle. But the rocks in the stream bed really are responsible for the “melody” you hear in that gently moving stream, and sometimes the obstacles (“rocks”) in your path are there just to teach you the lesson on that particular journey.

It’s not always about the destination—sometimes it’s about the journey. That is the rocks rule.

Fourth rule, the fruit rule. Ever climb a tree as a kid to get a piece of fruit—probably an apple—off it. Ever notice where the biggest, ripest, juiciest apples are—always out on the furthest limb. For a good reason—they get the most sun in the good weather, and they get the first rain in the bad. Keep climbing out on those tree “limbs,” because that is what your founders did—founders of your towns, of your schools, of your state, of your country—that’s where the best “fruit” is.

Sometimes, you have to take a bit of a risk—climb a bit further out on the limb—to get to your goal or to dare your dream.

There’s a wonderful story called Pentimento by the writer Lillian Hellman, the story of two friends, two young girls, one American one British, and one is getting ready to leave and go off to school. They made a movie called Julia about it, with Lynn Redgrave and Jane Fonda in the starring roles. In the movie—as in the book—the character who stays behind—as her friend boards a ship that will take her to her new life—so you have the picture now (two girls at the dock saying goodbye to each other, perhaps forever)—the one who is staying behind yells out to her friend: “have fun, take chances.” Have fun. Take chances. Climb out on that limb once in a while—take some chances—because that is where the really good fruit is sometimes.

That little bit of "calculated risk taking"—knowing when to chance the limb—is part of leadership too, sometimes the difference between success and failure. And that is the fruit rule.

Fifth rule, the 12 ounce rule. Any science teachers here? Let me ask you—is there a name for the scientific principle that you never get out a beaker more—in fluid ounces—than you put in? Whatever its name—the principle is simple—you only get out what you put in. Anyone ever have a parent say that to you? You only get out what you put in—my father said that about everything and all the time—sports, school, even marriage.

Well in science—you only get out what you put in—means if you put 12 ounces of something in a beaker, you’re never going to get more than twelve ounces out. The good news is you might get something that taste a lot better or looks a lot better or even, or has healing powers to it—depending on what combination of things you put in that beaker. That 12 ounces of fluid might change into something very different because of the combination of chemicals or liquids you put in there, but in the end, it will never be more than what you put into the beaker in the first place—12 ounces.

Same goes for life. You won’t get out any more than what you put in—you have to make the effort, be disciplined about your work and about your play, do your reading on time, ask for
help if you can’t get started on that essay or you can’t figure out how to hit the curveball in baseball or the riser in softball—but put the effort in, and you will succeed. That’s the 12 ounce rule.

So what do we have with these five rules. Pretty simple really.

- The Golden Rule—that’s all about your own humanity (your key to happiness).
- The Knockdown Rule—that’s just about determination, all leaders display it.
- The Rocks Rule—that’s about the journey, which is where the lesson usually lives.
- The Fruit Rule—that all about chances, as in taking some.
- The 12 Ounce Rule—that’s all about effort—you only get out what you put in.

My last assignment today—share with you a parable that tells us a lot about life and about leadership.

Somebody else once said that a “school building is four walls with tomorrow inside.” Well your tomorrow starts today. And I want to leave you with this parable in your head and in your hand (you should all have copies in front of you). It is a parable you know well from the bible, but perhaps one you have never quite thought about in exactly the way we are about to discuss. My version of the parable is called: “Everything I Need to Know, I Learned from Noah’s Ark.”

Here is how it goes:

“Don’t miss the boat.
Remember that we are all in the same boat.
Plan ahead. It wasn’t raining when Noah built the ark.
Stay fit. When you are 600 years old, someone may ask you to do something really big.
Don’t listen to critics, just get on with the job that needs to be done.
Build your future on high ground.
For safety’s sake, travel in pairs.
Speed isn’t always an advantage. The snails were on board with the cheetahs.
When you’re stressed, float for awhile.
Remember the ark was built by amateurs, the Titanic by professionals.
No matter the storm, when you are with God, there’s always a rainbow waiting.”

All very simple. All good advice and very likely true. Now I want you to put the small sheet with these 11 guidelines in your wallet or your purse—or better yet photograph it and put it in your ipad or iphone. Keep it with you for a while. Look at it when times are tough and when times are good. It has some helpful suggestions for both situations.

Congratulations—the leadership in each of your schools chose YOU to be together here today. Thank you for your attention. Good luck on your road to leadership!!