Vermilion Catholic ‘walks on shoulders of giants’

By Bruce Murray
Vermilion Bureau Writer

BBEVILLE — Vermilion Catholic High School composition teacher Ron Bodin never dreamed he would one day be in Washington D.C. shaking hands with the president of the United States.

May 30, he will be doing just that on behalf of the school, which recently was selected from hundreds of schools nationwide as a Blue Ribbon school by U.S. Department of Education.

The program recognizes the finest high schools, both public and private, across the nation. Vermilion Catholic was one of 92 schools nominated for the program. It was among 100 schools selected for the award.

Bodin, who was Vermilion Catholic’s Blue Ribbon program coordinator, will be the sole representative from the school to receive the official honors.

“This is unbelievable for me,” Bodin said. “We all walk on the shoulders of giants at Vermilion Catholic. We have a long tradition of excellence here, and I’m a lucky guy to be standing on the shoulders of giants.”

In applying for the Blue Ribbon nomination, Bodin prepared 35 pages of documentation and 55 pages of narrative.

“That was my term paper,” he said.

After receiving the nomination, Bodin said a site judge, the principal of a high school in New York City, visited the school and randomly picked out students and teachers to interview.

“And then he left. We had no idea,” Bodin said.

Vermilion Catholic Principal George Laird said achieving the Blue Ribbon award was a long-term effort on the part of Vermilion Catholic staff, students and parents.

“The criteria and standards you have to reach call for a lot of research into the school five years hence — where you’re graduates have gone, how many graduated, what professions they are in. It takes a lot of research. What they really are doing is evaluating how effective your school is over a five-year period,” he said.

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Vermilion Catholic:

Laird said Vermilion Catholic was in a good position to meet the criteria because it uses similar criteria in evaluating itself. “We survey our graduates one year hence, and ask them what Vermilion Catholic did for them and what it did not do for them. From there, we develop our curriculum. It takes three to four years to develop and establish a program to see if it works, and every year, you adjust it,” Bodin said.

Bodin said Vermilion Catholic began its quest for the Blue Ribbon award five years ago, when the school conducted an evaluation of itself.

“For the first time, we brought in parents, students and people from USL to adjust our curriculum on an annual basis,” he said.

The school modified courses where it found deficiencies. For example, Bodin said college graduates were experiencing a high failure rate in college algebra.

Now, Vermilion Catholic offers a college-prep algebra course, “and our failure rate is less than 10 percent,” Bodin said. “That took a major psychological effort for people to give up their turf to people (from USL) who had more experience.”

The school also took suggestions from parents, Bodin said. “We brought the kids in with their parents and asked them, ‘What would be the perfect school — if money were not an issue.’ A primary thing parents wanted was for their children to have a profound respect for other people.

“So we developed a zero-tolerance policy as it relates to sexism, racism, homophobia and violence — we don’t tolerate that type of behavior and we don’t want to hear those types of attitudes,” Bodin said.

The fact that this policy was formed at the direction of parents makes Vermilion Catholic unique — and hence, “Blue Ribbon,” Bodin said.

“We listen to what they want, and do what they want,” he said.

“They are the ones who pay tuition. They are our bosses.”

Another program that was developed at the direction of parents was a peer counseling program, in which seniors are trained to counsel other students.

“We have come very far with the development of our academic curriculum, but the kids’ social needs had far outstripped their institutional needs,” Bodin said.

“The lesson for kids is that everyone here really cares about them.”

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