

IRISH EYES

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CELEBRATING THE FATHER RYAN FAMILY

Strategic Plan Unveiled *p. 1*

Kicker Named Mr. Football *p. 4*

One Alum's 80-year Journey Home *p. 7*



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[COVER STORY]

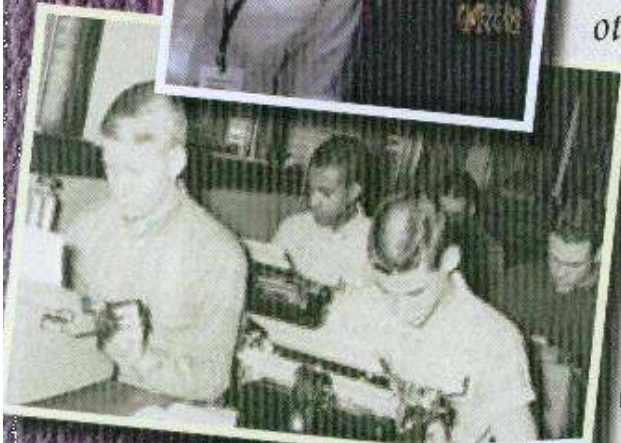
CELEBRATING THE FATHER RYAN FAMILY

“What greater thing is there for human souls than to feel that they are joined for life—to be with each other in silent unspeakable memories.” ~George Eliot

Whatever memories you have of Father Ryan, there are thousands across the world who share the same ones. Do you remember the plaid skirts? The cafeteria's biscuits? Sports practice at Centennial Park? Two people on the opposite side of the world meet and discover they share a commonality—Father Ryan.

It's a story that happens all the time. Anyone from Father Ryan can attest that making that connection with someone is like finding a long-lost family member. Forgetting generational differences, the camaraderie between two members of the Irish family is already established. And it is easy to do with family reaching every corner of the globe, counting thousands of alumni, staff, parents, grandparents and friends.

Not too far from home are five people who recognize the importance of that family and how its influence on their lives and their influence on others' lives are necessary to a successful and fulfilling life. Britt '87 and Scott '78 Hunt, Nanette Baker '75, Michele Johnson '87 and Greg Carson all share a drive to give back. Whether through the justice system, the family business or the classroom, they are dedicated to improving life for the next generation of their family.



Michelle Johnson '87

The role of mother is never clearly defined, but moms everywhere could argue it often intertwines with the roles of teacher, doctor and lawyer.



Michele Johnson is familiar with all three. As co-founder and managing attorney for the Tennessee Justice Center, she spends her day fighting for low-income families and educating them about their legal rights to obtain healthcare, especially children in need. "Everyone deserves an advocate," she says.

Those needing an advocate tally at about 300. That is the number of people who contact the Tennessee Justice Center each year, many of whom are single parents or elderly—half are on TennCare while the other half have been denied by an insurance company.

Michele knows the ins and outs of TennCare all too well. She has lobbied for healthcare coverage for uninsured children for nearly two decades. During that time, she negotiated a class action settlement for healthcare reform involving 665,000 children enrolled in TennCare.

"I do case reviews that are just heart-wrenching. People think those who need healthcare get it, but they don't. Children should have what they need," she asserts. But she knows that many of those children are denied the basics, like a hearing aid. "We view healthcare as a commodity. The reality is that many lose their life because of poor healthcare coverage."

Established in 1994, TennCare is the only program in the nation to enroll the entire state Medicaid population in managed care, according to www.tennessee.gov. In case you were wondering, that's 1.2 million people in Tennessee; 700,000 of whom are children. The program only covers a paltry one-third of children in the state.

As a mother with three children of her own, Michele relates to and is motivated by the clients she helps every day. "The people who deal with health insurance companies are almost all women," she explains. Those women are often single mothers fighting insurance companies that deny coverage for their children. "The moms I get to work with are so inspiring. They call us because they want to make a difference for others."

Each year, the Tennessee Justice Center recognizes six mothers who have been exceptional advocates for children in need of healthcare. Many of those mothers have testified in court and spoken with the media about their own experiences to stimulate change for their child and for others' children. To honor them, the Justice Center sends a professional photographer to take a family portrait because few can afford or have family photos.

"Every single person matters" is an aphorism at the core of Michele's work, and her lengthy history in social justice is evidence. She has worked with dozens of service organizations like the Jesuit Volunteer Corps, helping elderly receive healthcare benefits and serving as a youth director of an inner-city church; Renewal House, volunteering with mothers who suffer from addiction and their children; and the Legal Aid Society of Middle Tennessee.

Years before law school, she became motivated to serve. "I knew I wanted to serve while I was at Father Ryan. My senior service at High Hopes was an inspiration. My teachers, too. I was motivated through their example of service and called by the gospel to be of service."

Her dad, Richard Johnson '47, recognized her gift for service early on and also provided inspiration. "My dad said, 'You should be a lawyer. Argue for people who can't argue for themselves.' That's when I knew I wanted to go to law school. I wanted to level the playing field for people who have great value but whom our society gives little value to."

Since then, she has successfully lobbied for dozens of families in need and hopes to spread her father's inspiration to her three boys, whom she says have helped her raise money for the Justice Center. If one thing is clear, it is that her family life presents a steady framework for her job; the benefits are two-fold. "My career makes me thankful for my children. It's such a gift for my children to know the people I work with, too."

Like her family, faith plays heavily in her career and imparts a refreshing perspective to a strenuous job. "Faith makes my career hard to leave, but it also recharges my batteries. We don't always win. Sometimes we have lots of losses. But it gives me a broad view and provides a context for those losses. It gives me strength when a solution and victory is in sight."

She encourages anyone interested in helping families to visit www.tnjustice.org to donate, become a TJC Facebook fan, invite the TJC to share clients' stories with your church or school or simply volunteer. ♡

*"Everyone
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advocate."*