

Al Smith's legacy swims through Baltimore

Tim Cadigan's eyes widened as he walked into the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel in Manhattan last year.

Former British Prime Minister Tony Blair and other influential dignitaries from around the world were in attendance, taking part in the annual Alfred E. Smith Memorial Foundation Dinner.

The event honors the first Roman Catholic and Irish-American to be a major party's nominee for president. Tim, then 16, was aware of Mr. Smith's legacy, since he is one of his great-great-grandchildren, but the magnitude of his ancestor's life was finally in plain view.

A junior at Calvert Hall College High School in Towson and a standout swimmer, Tim has already been voted to the parish council at Shrine of the Sacred Heart in Mount Washington.

His keepsakes of last year's dinner include two photos taken with Mr. Blair, who two months later converted to Catholicism.

"We joke in my house," Tim said, "that it was because of me."

For more than 60 years, the Al Smith Dinner has been a fixture on the American political scene. Founded in 1946, the dinner celebrates the former governor of New York, who fought religious bigotry during his quest to lead the country.

The Democrat lost to Republican Herbert Hoover, but his ground-breaking 1928 quest reverberates.

"People saw there were real threats to the country, and it wasn't the pope," said John Cadigan, Tim's father.

Sen. John McCain and Sen. Barack Obama were both scheduled to be keynote speakers at this year's Al Smith Dinner Oct. 16 at the Waldorf-Astoria.

"It's amazing to think an event such as the Al Smith Dinner can have so much of an impact on the country," Tim said.

Attending the Al Smith Dinner at the age of the 16 has become something of a rite of passage for Cadigan men.

Tim's father went to his first dinner in 1980, when then-president Jimmy Carter and challenger Ronald Reagan spoke at an event known for its humor. Mr. Cadigan attended the event with his mother, Anne, who was the youngest granddaughter of Mr. Smith.

"Just listening to national leaders speak and a soon to be president extolling the virtues of somebody in your family is a source of great pride," Mr. Cadigan remembered.

He said that his family changed when his mother died in 1998.

"I think each of us in our own way," Mr. Cadigan said, "wanted to get involved in the church a little bit more."

Mr. Cadigan went on to serve as president of the parish council at the Shrine of the Sacred Heart. Tim followed suit, winning a seat on the parish council this past spring.

He hopes to secure more youth involvement at Mass. Despite his youth, he feels he can make a difference.

A church sacristan, Tim is a member of 10 clubs at Calvert Hall.. A member of the North Baltimore Aquatic Club, he logs nearly 30 hours a week in the pool.

"I have about 30-40 minutes of free time in my day," he said.

That doesn't mean he's not thinking about following in his great-great-grandfather's footsteps.

"I don't know if I see myself running for president," Tim said, "but I definitely have an interest in politics."