

# Remembering Mark Pacione: Part I: Stories from youth who were impacted during his local ministry



*“There is a light that can overcome the darkness; there is no darkness that  
can overcome the light...”*

*Photo collage made by Jeff Will*

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*“Young people are my ‘holy door’ always. They are the door to what is holy. They are  
the door to my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. They are the door to my faith.”*

*-Mark Pacione*

## **Remembering Mark:**

When Pope St. John Paul II died in 2005, there were countless calls for “Santo subito” (“Sainthood now”) as people from around the world were expressing what was on their minds in regard to the passing of this holy man and leader of the Church.

And though we are not hearing the words “Santo subito” this week, people from every corner of the Archdiocese of Baltimore and throughout the youth ministry world in the U.S. Catholic Church are indeed sharing what is on their minds....

We lost a holy man on December 29, an advocate for youth and for those who work with youth, and a true Christian role model for all who seek to be disciples of the Lord.

Our newsfeeds on Facebook and Twitter have been filled with testimonials from youth and adults who have been touched by the life of the man who lived in Fallston and who witnessed to the Gospel by the way he lived his life each and every day.

That man was Mark Pacione, who on Monday, at age 60, died suddenly and left us filled simultaneously with deep sadness and grateful joy as he made his way into the Nearer Presence of the Lord.

Mark was an inspiration to all of us who work with youth and with our Catholic schools. I met him when I started teaching at John Carroll in 1981, when he was working at nearby St. Margaret School/Church. When Mark moved on to the Archdiocesan Office of Youth Ministry, I attended workshops and training sessions with him, as well as brought my students to youth events sponsored by his office. Our paths often crossed over the years on retreats, at conferences, area youth events, and at board meetings for the Msgr. O'Dwyer Retreat House.

Mark was always inspiring and a role model to youth and adults alike. Like so many other people, I will be forever changed by knowing this good and holy man.

### **Watch for Part 2:**

"Remembering Mark Pacione: Part 2: Stories from local and national Church leaders" will be posted later today with memories from those who served with Mark or were impacted by him during their service to the Archdiocese of Baltimore, as well as in national youth ministry.

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*"Young people, more than other generations before, are truly excited to grab that task and go rescue the world in so many ways." -Mark Pacione*

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**Remembering the youth ministry days in Bel Air:**

## Some testimonies from Mark's service at St. Margaret's:

***"He carried me..."***

### **Shannon Baker:**

Shannon, a graduate of The John Carroll School, now a school counselor in Austin, Texas, was in Mark's Religion Class when he taught Religion and was youth minister at St. Margaret School/Church from her middle school and high school years.

She reflects:

*"Obviously there are memories of dances and classroom antics, but I will always remember Mr. Pacione for his kindness on a spring day when I was a pre-teen. I can't be exact on the year, somewhere around 1980... I had surgery on both legs, and though I'd recovered from it, any lengthy walking would leave me in pain. I was never one to quit or give up, and I was determined to walk like everyone else. St. Margaret's had a field day each year. This include walking from our school to John Carroll. By the return trip that day, I was in considerable pain and lagging far behind the group. Someone could have driven me home, but Mr. Pacione knew that it was important for me to be like everyone else. It was important that I "walk" back to SMS. Without hesitation, he picked me up and put me on his shoulders. I should add that I wasn't a little kid. He was strong and he carried me with a poise that made me feel like a queen rather than a chubby girl with messed up legs. The class laughed and sang all the way back to campus. Thanks to Mr. Pacione, I wasn't left behind."*



Shannon shares this photo from her 1993 eighth graduation from St. Margaret School:

(From left) Gina Rapisarda Fritz, Susan Derby, Mr. Pacione, Cristy Kovach Hom, with Shannon Baker on the right

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### **John and Sue Kutcher:**

John Kutcher and his wife, Sue Weller Kutcher, were both highly impacted by Mark Pacione in the early 1980s during their involvement with the St. Margaret youth group.

***“...intertwined faith with fun in such a seamless way...”***

**John recalls:**

*“Even at that time, it was clear that Mark was someone truly special and unique... He threw everything he had into building a community of youth, brought together by dozens of events, each designed to build collegiality.*

*“There are so many testaments to what Mark built in his years at St. Margaret’s, but none so strong as the fact that over 30 years later, most of those friendships remain some of the strongest each of us have. Watching my sons grow up in high school now, I can appreciate even more what Mark did for all of us, and for the community he served. The Youth Group he assembled drew from multiple high schools — and brought together individuals from all walks of life and interests. Athletes, musicians, scholars, introverts, extroverts — it didn’t matter. Together, we were all just one big group. It was hands down “the” thing to do in high school for hundreds of members. All of these things are truly remarkable, given the diversity of interests, cliques, and everything else that often proves a challenge in the formidable years of teens growing up into young adults. To achieve all of these things could only be done with a combination of exceptional vision and passionate execution. Mark brought both of those with zeal.*

*“What’s equally amazing, is that Mark intertwined “faith” with “fun” in such a seamless and novel way, that we all were mentored and shaped, sometimes without even realizing it... Mark made an impact on so many young lives, and not just a minor impact, but a major one. To many, Mark is counted as one of the single most influential persons in their lives... He built a lasting legacy with nearly everyone he touched through his missions and passions to serve youth. Those friendships were built rock-solid on the bedrock of faith and fun... and they will last a lifetime for all*

*of us. Few people can count that type of impact in their life's legacy. We all thank Mark for the gift of so many strong and loving relationships that his vision brought together."*

**John's wife, Sue Weller Kutcher, a 1985 graduate of John Carroll, reflected back:**

***"...one of the most influential people in my life"***

*"To me, Mark was larger than life. I came into his life as young teenager when I was introduced to the St. Margaret Youth Group. The youth group became such a huge, important part of my life, and Mark was our fearless leader. We all had such respect and admiration for him. He made being a part of our youth group the cool thing to do. He did such an incredible job of bringing together kids from all walks of life: different schools, different interests, different home lives. Looking back, I cannot believe that he had the courage to take 30 kids out on a 100 mile, 3-day bike hike! And he did it with such ease- year after year."*

*"Mark was, without a doubt, one of the most influential people in my life. I realized this fact long ago, on one of my drives home from college- I can actually remember the exact moment. I was feeling very proud about how I was doing and it occurred to me at that moment that Mark was such a big reason why. Over the course of my years in the youth group Mark believed in me and trusted me to take on so many roles. By doing so, he taught me how to be a leader and instilled in me the belief that I could accomplish whatever I wanted to if I worked hard for it. And I know he did this for so many others as well."*

*"I am forever grateful that Mark was a part of my life. And for all of us that had the privilege of being part of the St. Margaret Youth Group during Mark's years as our leader, we are forever bonded to each other."*

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***"I needed to tell someone what this man did for me"***

## **A life-saving testimony from “Mags:”**

*“I can thanks Mark for setting me on the path out of the dark place I was in after my family moved out of Harford County. I was on the road to self-destruction and suicide, particularly after an assault, and he was one of the only people who was willing to sit and listen without judgment. He just wanted to make sure I was okay, whatever that took. Mark told me that meant I should focus on everything that could help me heal...”*

*“He helped me more than all the paid-for therapy I had over the years. I needed to tell someone what this man did for me... And I’m healthy and happy now.”*

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## ***“I will search for you when you are not around”***

### **Kelly McDonald:**

Kelly, a 1983 graduate of John Carroll, has been a teacher at St. Margaret School for the past 27 years, but she traces her memories with Mark Pacione back to her teen years in 1979 when Mark, who had just been hired, spoke at Mass about starting a youth group. Kelly became an active member “from the very first meeting... was on the first Board of the Youth Group under Mark’s ministry.”

She recalls:

*“My best memory of Mark is not one of my proudest moments, although it is something that has been brought up again and again over the years! It was 1981 when the Youth Group filled a bus to attend a Huey Lewis and the News concert at Merriweather Post Pavilion. Somehow, my two friends and I managed to get lost and were unable to find the bus at the end of the concert. The bus left, but Mark stayed behind to search for us. With the help of the Howard County Police Department and several phone calls from us at a pay phone, we were “found.” Mark bought all three of us hot fudge sundaes at the Double T Diner on Route 40 while we waited for my mother to come get us.”*

Kelly attended the “**SEARCH** for Christian Maturity” Retreat in 1983 and shares the retreat letter she received from Mark dated May 15, 1983: (Read more about the SEARCH Retreat [here](#).)

***Dear Kelly,***

*Good morning, I hope that your Search weekend has been both an exciting and a learning experience. I have prayed for you every hour throughout this weekend in hope that this would be a meaningful time for you...*

*...Although we joke about it now, I hope that the experience of me searching for you at the concert two summers ago becomes sort of symbolic for us. I hope you realize that I don't want you to be just another youth who hung around St. Margaret's during her high school years. I want you to be my friend and I will search for you when you are not around and celebrate with hot fudge sundaes when you return...*

*Much love,*

*Mark*

**Kelly sums it up:**

*“Mark, I know that you are my angel now. I know that you will continue your search for me and we will one day sit together, my friend, and enjoy a hot fudge sundae!!”*

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***“... instrumental in encouraging me to become a CCD teacher.”***

**Karen Smith Natkin:**

Karen, another John Carroll graduate, recalls first meeting Mark Pacione in 1979 when he came to St. Margaret School:

*“Mark was our religion teacher, youth group leader, mentor, and friend. He was instrumental in encouraging me to become a CCD teacher. And his love of music and the guitar helped me to appreciate my skills as a guitarist.*

*“Throughout the years, I would run into him and we would always catch up on Beth and Carol, and what was going on in the diocese. Mark was a friend to all and will be missed. Rest in peace, Mark!!”*

Note:

Karen submitted two photos from her 1981 St. Margaret School graduation trip to Lancaster and from their graduation party where Mark was presented a gift on behalf of their class. We regret that these photos were not clear enough for publication.

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***“A ‘Mark collage’ in my heart...”***

**Eileen Fahres Raff:**

Eileen too remembers Mark Pacione when he was her youth minister at St. Margaret Parish during her high school years, 1982-1985. She became involved and later helped with the Archdiocesan Youth Days as a young adult.

Eileen shared:

*“My mother has often said she should thank Mark for helping raise us. Mark entered my life at a time when I was struggling with adolescence and finding my way. His ministry at St. Margaret’s Church reached me. The youth group he founded gave me a positive social group, a place where I always felt welcomed, accepted, and appreciated.*

*“There were so many wonderful things that I experienced through the youth group. I have so many friends that I never would have met if not for Mark and Carol. We share closer ties than just old high school friends, because we explored our faith deeply together. We are family.*

*“Right now there’s just this big jumbled-up sort of “Mark collage” in my heart, of his genuine concern for all of us, his humor, his musical and other creative talents, all the people whose lives he touched, all the great work he did... his hardworking,*



*humble, gentle soul.*

*“Mark knew many, many people, and he and I would often go years without seeing each other. Each time we would finally cross paths again, Mark would give me his warm smile and seem so touched to see me again. I don’t think I will ever know anyone like Mark again, but my life is forever changed for the better for having known him.”*

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### **Following in his footsteps:**

***“Surely you must know how proud I am of you.” -Mark to Kristin Rupprecht, seen here during her high school days***

**Kristin Rupprecht**, a 1988 John Carroll grad, has served as the Youth and Young Adult Minister at Saint Margaret Church since 2010. A former member of his youth group from her high school days, Kristin feels honored to follow in the footsteps of her own youth minister.

Kristin recalls:

*“I first met Mark when I was in 5th grade. He was my religion teacher in middle school, my youth minister in high school, and I babysat his daughter. He was my boss for a while after college when I worked as his Special Projects Assistant in the Office of Youth Ministry, and my mentor as I transitioned into youth ministry. He and Carol were our sponsor couple when my husband and I prepared to get married.*

*Mark sang at our wedding, and has been a friend and true role model.*

*“My best memories of Mark are from my Saint Margaret youth group days. Through that experience, we were all blessed to have an incredible man minister to us from his Christ-filled heart, and thus I learned how to minister to others. He lifted up every one of us, no matter our situation. He saw only the best in each of us, and ensured we knew what that was. He taught us life-lessons in love, in kindness, in*

*laughter, in friendship.*

*"I am humbled and honored to be following in his footsteps at Saint Margaret. When I expressed this to him one time, his response was, "Surely you must know how proud I am of you." I cannot describe the joy those words brought to me.*

*"May his ministry live on in those whose lives he touched, because as Mark said often, true ministry duplicates itself."*

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### **Shadowing her role model:**

***"... he always radiated love and warmth"***

**Karen Fahres Walsh** met Mark Pacione back in 1982 when she was 14 and he got her involved in the youth group at St. Margaret's and regional youth events.

She remembers:

*"I became very active in Youth Day, the NRACYAC Convention (Northeast Rural Area Catholic Youth Advisory Council) held at John Carroll every year, and in all of the youth group activities throughout my high school years.*

*"As is true of most people who met Mark, I have a million stories, and can name a million ways he touched my life. I attended Mark and Carol's wedding and babysat for Beth from birth to age 6. I attended and helped plan so many youth group events that I lost count. I had numerous adventures with him on Bike Hikes, Canoe Trips and Codorus Camping trips.*

*"However, the one story that sticks out in my mind the most is from high school when, for a career day, I "shadowed" Mark at St. Margaret for a work day, to see what being a Youth Minister was really like.*

*"Mark was amused that I had chosen to follow him, since our teacher had told us we were allowed to pick anyone we wanted to shadow for a day. He thought his job could be tedious and that I would get bored, but I loved what he did and wanted to spend the day with him.*

*“Although his job was very busy and we had a lot to do all day, I was amazed by how everyone he came in contact with loved him as much as I did, and as much as all of my youth group friends did. It wasn’t just at the church or the school. I accompanied him on errands he had to run and he also took me to lunch that day. Everywhere we went, he made people smile and laugh, just by being himself. It wasn’t that he set out to charm people, it was just the way Mark carried himself, and the way he acted that drew everyone to him and made people happy. He always radiated love and warmth and his calm demeanor made people comfortable around him.*

*“To me, Mark epitomized the Golden Rule of “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” He treated everyone equally and told me, that we are all God’s children, He loves us all the same, so who are we to treat anyone poorly? Mark was a wonderful, loving man who influenced my life in numerous ways. I still remember the things he taught me and will miss him dearly.”*

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*“As much as I love youth and young adult ministry, my real passion is to serve the Archdiocese of Baltimore. I grew up in this diocese. I rejoice in its successes and hurt when things are not so happy. I want to help.” -Mark Pacione*

### **Our love and prayers:**

Sending our love and deepest condolences to Carol, Beth and Ian, Mary Louise, and Mark’s entire family: Our hearts and tears are joined with yours. Be assured of our prayers as we honor Mark’s profound impact by the way we live our lives.

Amen.

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**Read more here about Mark Pacione’s “reMarkable” ministry:**

1. Read Mark's obituary by George P. Matysek, Jr. from The Catholic Review;
2. "The National Federation for Catholic Youth Ministry mourns the loss of a great friend, colleague, and servant of God." Read the beautiful tribute from the NFCYM [here](#);
3. From the Catholic Review: "Longtime youth director named to schools planning position:" Read this June 16, 2009 article [here](#);
4. From the Baltimore Sun: "'St. Pius X parishioners recall role in 1995 visit of Pope John Paul II'"

Read this April 23, 2014 article on Mark and Carol Pacione [here](#);

Included are photos of the Paciones at the Pope John Paul II Prayer Garden by Brian Krista/Baltimore Sun.



(Photo: Brian Krista/Baltimore Sun)

5. "The Fifth Mark of the Church" from June 12, 2009:

On Mark's last day as the Director of Youth and Young Adult Ministry, D. Scott Miller, former Director of Youth and Young Adult Ministry who took his place, recalls the annual Youth Pilgrimage (themed "One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic:" the four marks of the Church) when Cardinal Keeler thanked Mark for his leadership that day, musing that perhaps "Mark Pacione is the fifth mark of the church."

6. Obituary and book of condolences from McComas Funeral Home;
7. Read the "definition" of Mark Pacione from the Urban Dictionary.

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***Rest in peace, good and faithful servant.***

