**MARK FRIDAY TAKES HELM as GESU PRINCIPAL**

By M.B. Dillon

After Gesu School Principal Christa Laurin retired last summer, pastor Fr. Phillip Cooke S.J. confronted a big task: replacing a stellar leader who over 14 years restored hope by increasing enrollment and making Gesu more economically and socially sustainable.

“We were looking for a team player, someone who could educate the whole person -- mind, body and spirit -- somebody who could form in their Christian faith children made in the image and likeness of God,” Fr. Cooke said. “The hiring process started before the death of George Floyd and ended after his death. A question asked of all candidates was, ‘How do you manage your racial biases?’ Having a school that is 85-percent African-American, we wanted someone who could help us understand what it means to be Catholic in a school that is mixed in its population; and someone who could lead us in building the kingdom of God in a climate with social and racial unrest. We needed someone strong in their faith with the ability to develop the social and emotional well-being of our students.”

Fr. Cooke found his man in Mark Friday, 49, a 20-year veteran in education and the married father of three. “Mark is someone who is going to create a culture amongst our children to fulfill their potential in light of the Gospel, so that every child who walks out of here has the capacity to go to any high school in metro-Detroit,” said the pastor. “We want to be a destination school.”

A native Detroiter and Wayne State University graduate, Friday is the fourth oldest in a family of seven children. His father is a minister, as was his grandfather. He’s a longtime active member of Christian Fellowship Church of Detroit in Lincoln Park. “Growing up in our family, two things were consistent: number one, our faith. We grew up in the church. Number two: education. My parents saw the value of a Catholic education,” said Friday, who graduated from Detroit’s St. Brigid Elementary School. “Private schools were always doing better in terms of what they produced.” Friday and his wife Rhonda sent their own boys, Daniel and Isaiah, to the University of Detroit Jesuit High School & Academy.

Friday starred in football, basketball and track at Chadsey High School, graduating in 1989 and earning a scholarship to the University of Akron where as a red-shirt freshman, he started five games at quarterback. Friday transferred to Wayne State and studied psychology.

Pursuing his gridiron dreams with the Arena Football League, Friday competed for the Albany Firebirds, the Berlin, Germany Rebels and the Iowa Barnstormers.

“After that I started coaching at Western High School and then went back to Chadsey,” Friday said. “In 1999, I ended up at Benedictine High School where I became coach and substitute teacher. I quickly became a full-time teacher as well as the assistant athletic director. I continued to pursue more challenging positions that allowed me opportunities to develop as an educator. It was during my time at Benedictine that I discovered my passion for having a positive impact on the lives of young people through education and committed myself to the field,” said Friday, who was Benedictine’s Head Football Coach. in 2004 when it closed.

Friday went on to hold administrative positions at charter schools including Old Redford Academy, University Prep, Academy of Warren and Detroit Leadership Academy. He coached basketball at U of D Jesuit Academy where his sons were students (2019, 2020) Friday earned his master’s degree in secondary education with an administrative K-12 certificate/endorsement from Grand Valley State University’s Detroit campus.

“I have always been an educator, whether I was a coach or teaching Bible study. It’s who I am,” said Friday. “I think everyone is gifted in different ways. I think that your life is more fulfilled if you act within your gifts. I have always been able to connect with young people. I think it’s because in a lot of ways, I’m still a kid at heart. I like playing and having fun. However I’ve accepted the monumental task of educating young people.

“Most of my experience has been with students who come from mid- to low-income socio-economic backgrounds,” Friday said. “But I can interact with every segment of society. I have a diverse set of skills which fortunately makes be comfortable interacting in any environment.”

**WHY GESU?**

“I wanted to be in a place where faith and education can intersect with no restrictions. I am not Catholic, but I am a believer in Jesus Christ,” Friday said. “In this season of my life -- I will be 50 next year -- I needed another space to continue my work -- His (Christ’s) work. So when this opportunity opened up, there were no reservations. When I was going to St. Brigid, Gesu was the spot. Gesu had a reputation for being exceptional in terms of leadership, academics and athletics. Gesu kids were top tier. Gesu was always held in the highest regard. One of my friends, when I got the job, said, ‘I knew you always wanted to be a Gesu Giant!’ I think at this time in my life, this is where God wants me. I also believe that the students need a person like me. As a black man and a non-Catholic, I am different from anyone who has held this position.

“The potential we have -- with Fr. Phil, and the administrative team that we have here -- we can do wonderful things to the glory of God. I want to create an environment that allows our African-American students to be unashamedly Christian and unapologetically black, as well as allowing all of our students to be comfortable with who they are as learners but most importantly in Christ” said Friday. “I want to create an environment that is receptive to the diversity in our community. I want Gesu to be a community hub with a vast array of offerings. I want our Parish to be the communal spot in the university district and throughout the Metropolitan Detroit area. I want all the highest-achieving high schools in metro-Detroit to come here for the purpose of recruiting our students because their schools need our kids. I don’t want our students concerned about their high school destination, I want the high schools after our students because they are the brightest and the best.

**BUILDING**

“There’s a steady build that must take place,” Friday added. “Once the community and alumni recognize what we are trying to do, then we can build on the support that we are currently receiving. We want retain our top-tier teachers, continue the development of our top-tier facility, and provide our families with unrivaled offerings, both academically (Math Olympics, spelling bees, STEM, Robotics, etc.), co/extracurricular (baseball, basketball, football, volleyball, soccer, track cheer etc.) as well as community based mentor groups and organizations. We want our kids to be able to experience all that is available from the time they walk in the door to the time they walk across the stage as graduates. I want to be a conduit for our future leaders academically competent, socially aware and committed to service, all to the Glory of God.

“We have to find money to pay teachers what they are worth,” said Friday. “Teachers are responsible for every profession if you think about it. A lot of times, it’s the teachers at this level who light the spark to desire knowledge and understanding. Unfortunately, we do not recognize that. The amount of work an elementary and middle school teachers do is higher than that of a college professor.”

**PANDEMIC**

Like it did in the spring, Gesu is coping with COVID-19. “We are operating on a dual platform,” Friday said. “We have some students who are in-person learners; some are distance learners. We have put and continuing to put structures in place to support our community during these unprecedented times. We are willing to do whatever is necessary, within reason, to provide the best experience for our clientele..”

There’s a bright side, the principal said. “Catholic education, and education in the United States of America, is steeped in tradition. We do things because we’ve always done them. We now have an opportunity now to evaluate the sustainability of how we have done things as well as consider how we can do things better. We are at a point where we can redefine how we do what we do. Moving forward, the pandemic can be viewed as an opportunity. How can we leverage it? How can we develop mechanisms to identify the best practices to provide the outcomes we’re looking for?”

Before the coronavirus, virtual instruction was a rarity. “Until we were forced to look into alternative technology for teaching and learning, Zoom was utilized mostly in the corporate arena, by the way, I wish I had invested,” said Friday. “Now, we can maintain instruction even when a student has to be out of the building, the technology is here. We can use this as a springboard to provide a myriad of academic offerings.”

In this time of social and political unrest, “we are sitting on a powder keg,” said Friday. “We need to be prepared to respond. I believe that we (Children of God) serve a God that is bigger than all of this. I know that we win; it’s just a matter of playing it out. Working in that reality is encouraging, it’s energizing. In those moments when it seems daunting, it's encouraging to know the outcome. In the end, I believe Jesus is ruling on the throne, and His people are with Him.” In the interim, I plan on working daily to advance His kingdom through education.”