

A newsmaker you should know: Chemist/brewer-turned-educator drawn to Seton-La Salle post

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By Margaret Smykla

As an assistant brewer at the Latrobe Brewing Co. with degrees in chemistry and chemical engineering, Brad Bernas often tutored colleagues' children in mathematics and science.

He found he enjoyed teaching and quit his job to attend nearby Saint Vincent College in Unity to get a certificate in secondary education.

He taught for nearly a decade in Kiski Area School District and began his first administrative post in education July 1 as academic assistant principal at Seton-La Salle Catholic High School in Mt. Lebanon.

He said he's in this job for the long haul.

"I want to see both my kids graduate from here while I am here," he said of his children, ages 5 and 10. "I really believe in the principles of Catholic school and the morals that are taught."

Mr. Bernas said he was drawn to Seton-La Salle by its quality academics.

"The education is top-notch. You have parents in Upper St. Clair and Mt. Lebanon paying those taxes and yet sending their kids here," he said.

Growing up, the budding scientist enjoyed disassembling machinery, such as the family lawn mower and dishwasher, to examine the interiors.

"I was always interested in figuring out how things worked," he said.

As a student at the University of Wisconsin pondering a career in chemistry or physics, Mr. Bernas was recommended for a position at nearby Aldrich Chemical by a laboratory teacher.

Besides the hands-on lab experience, the job paid his college bills.

"I would work a 12-hour night shift and then sleep an hour in my car before school," he said.

After graduating in 1992, he applied his skills to improving a dishwasher detergent at Procter & Gamble.

Then, as his interest grew in understanding how the manufacturer's tanks and valves and pipes worked, Mr. Bernas balanced full-time employment with classes at the University of Dayton for a master's degree in chemical engineering.

Despite his busy schedule, he found time to go on an arranged date with a Procter & Gamble chemical engineer who would later become his wife.

Mr. Bernas helped land his next job at Latrobe Brewing Co. with his master's thesis, "Computational Fluid Dynamics," which involved beverage processing.

As an assistant brewer, he utilized his chemistry and engineering skills in the blending and formulation of batches, and in quality control.

"The raw materials would change but the product cannot," he said of ensuring that the brew always tastes the same.

Mr. Bernas quit the brewery in 2001 after graduating from Saint Vincent and landed his first teaching job instructing chemistry, Advanced Placement chemistry and family and consumer sciences in the Kiski district.

After eight years, he enrolled part-time at California University of Pennsylvania for his K-12 administration certification to become a principal.

"I wanted to be more of an influence on how kids are educated," Mr. Bernas said. "I had ideas I wanted to try."

He carried out his principal internship at Kiski Area while continuing to teach.

The biggest challenge today for the lifelong learner is more of what he enjoys most: learning.

"It is understanding what the school needs and wants in an academic assistant principal, and establishing the needs and wants of the students and teachers," he said.

Other than relocating his family to the South Hills, his immediate and long-term goals are to "maintain the Seton-La Salle brand: Keep it great."

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