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Cabrini University Student Media

Devoted Cabrini alumna of 1969 continues to live her education of the heart

by **Cecelia Heckman** on January 19, 2017 in **Lifestyles, Top Stories**



Cabrini alumna Joanne Balshi ('69) and her husband Thomas Balshi at the 2016 Cabrini Visionaries Gala. Photo by Angelina Miller

A long history with Cabrini

Finding Cabrini University on a map is easy. Finding Cabrini University when you are driving to it is a whole other story. Hidden behind the trees, it can be easy to drive right by any of the three entrances. However, that long drive through the trees lands you on a beautiful campus, one that sticks with many students long after graduation.

Alumna Joanne Kovacs Balshi loves making that drive. Even 47 years after her graduation, she said when she pulls onto campus she feels like she is back home.

"Wide-open walkways and leaves blowing in the fall and azaleas everywhere in the spring. I mean, to me it was just absolutely God's gift," Balshi said. "Everything was so beautiful. I remember so many times walking like from Grace Hall to the Mansion or over to the library senior year and thinking how lucky I was to be living in a place like this."

An English major in the class of '69, Balshi was around when campus looked very different than it does today.

"Grace Hall was an underclassmen dorm. The Mansion was like everything. It was all of the academic leadership and the dean and it was also the dorm for the upperclassmen because there were no other dorms," Balshi, who lived in the Mansion her senior year, said. "Founder's [Hall] was called Sacred Heart Hall at that time and all the classes were in there, and [there was] the chapel and that was it. All that area back where the houses are now, that was all forest. It was amazing."

Balshi was also a senior when Holy Spirit Library was opened across from Founder's Hall. Formerly, all of the books from the library were kept in the basement of Founder's Hall.

"The students actually hand-carried the books from the old library, across the walk, into the new library," she said. "You know we would volunteer to do like six runs and back and forth, back and forth with all these heavy books and drop them off."

Balshi's dedication to Cabrini did not stop with her graduation. Soon after, she continued to stay involved with the Cabrini community in various ways.

"I never ever really wanted to let go of my college experience, so whenever they needed volunteers for anything I was always willing to do it," she said. "I was on committees for fundraisers and parties and things like that and then I became a member of the Alumni Board and [then] was elected president of the Alumni Association."

Besides her time spent with the Alumni Association, Balshi also spent 13 years on the board of trustees for Cabrini, first as a member representing the Alumni Board, then as a regular member, and finally, for her last three years on the board, as the chair. In all of that time, she was involved in much of Cabrini's history.

"I was by nature just involved in everything that was going on at the college," Balshi said. "I was on the committee that picked Dr. Iadarola to be the first lay-president, and I was on the first capital campaign committee and I was chair of the gala that took place that weekend, so I've been really pretty tightly involved for a long time."

Balshi even has ties with Cabrini's founder, Mother Ursula, who made sure Balshi always has a piece of Cabrini with her.

"Even after she went to the nursing facility, the sisters' nursing facility, I would visit her there and she gave me a relic of Mother Cabrini," Balshi said. "It's a little piece of Mother Cabrini's actual veil and I carry it with me everywhere I go, I'm never without it."



Joanne Kovacs Balshi always carries with her an image of Mother Cabrini with a relic attached to the back. Photo by Joanne Kovacs Balshi



Balshi was given a relic of Mother Cabrini by the founder of Cabrini University, Mother Ursula. Photo by Joanne Kovacs Balshi

Giving back to today's students

Joanne Kovacs became Joanne Kovacs Balshi only six weeks after her graduation from Cabrini, which, she said, "was kind of the thing to do back then. Practically the whole class got married that summer."

Her husband, Thomas Balshi, was a student at Villanova University when she chose to attend Cabrini. "It wasn't the most honorable reason," she said. "I chose Cabrini because of its proximity to Villanova...but, within weeks, I knew I had made a tremendous accidental decision, because I loved every minute of being here."

By the time she graduated and they were married, Thomas was finished his first year in dental school at Temple University. She said he chose the school for the same reason, proximity to home and Joanne.

Being married to a dental student meant Joanne learned all of the dental terminology right alongside him. He was in school and she was teaching English at Merion Mercy Academy. They both lived in Philadelphia and he walked to class while she drove to teach.

It was the Joanne's love for Cabrini, Thomas's dental experience at Temple and their joint knowledge of dentistry that led to their next big gift to Cabrini, working to create the 3+4 dentistry program between Temple and Cabrini.

"We always laugh about it that we got married twice, once when we were in our early 20s and once when Cabrini actually did marry Temple in a program," Balshi said. "That was something that we had in our heads for a really long time and finally all the chips just fell together."

After working with Cabrini's Dr. Kimberly Boyd, associate dean for student success, who was working with the Balshis on sabbatical at the time of the idea for the program's conception, and later speaking with the new dean at Temple at the time, the [program was announced in 2014](#).

For this, and their many other forms of dedication to Cabrini, Joanne and Thomas (an honorary Cabrini alumnus) were recently awarded Cabrini's [2016 Christopher Award for Extraordinary Leadership](#).



Joanne and Thomas Balshi pose with Cabrini's president Donald Taylor after receiving the Christopher Award at the 2016 Visionaries Gala. Photo by Angelina Miller

"That was a huge Cabrini honor. It was my, as I said in my speech, the greatest Cabrini moment of my life to, after all these years, have both my husband and I together recognized for the effort," she said. "People are usually recognized for giving large sums of money that build buildings, and we've never been in a position to actually do that. In our hearts we wish we could, but we've just never had enough excess capital to be able to build a building here. But to be able to do something that would be recognized really meant a lot to us and we're very excited about it."

Through the program, qualified students spend three years at Cabrini, followed by four years at Temple in order to obtain a DMD (Doctor of Dental Medicine) degree. Along with this program, the Balshis have worked to support a scholarship that will continue to provide extra financial stability to Cabrini students.

"We're hoping to build that scholarship," Balshi said. "Maybe some day more than one person a year will be able to get it. But that's our dream, to really be able to build that scholarship and see a lot of good dentistry coming out of Cabrini students."

A lifetime of charity: Pi Dental Foundation

The Balshis have not only made strides to help improve the lives of Cabrini students, but have also worked to help others throughout their professional lives.

In 1986 the Balshis opened a dental center together called [Prosthodontics Intermedica \(Pi\)](#), a clinical dental practice that also contains a research and teaching component. There, they work to treat patients and stay up to date on the cutting edge of prosthetic dentistry.

After 13 years of working the facility, they decided to begin a charity that would provide free advanced dental care to those with severe, almost life-threatening, dental conditions and no way to afford treatment. They named this the [Pi Foundation](#).

"Insurance does not cover some of the most extensive forms of dentistry and it's out of reach for the true poor and needy in our country," Joanne Balshi said. "Since 1999 we've given away about \$2 million worth of dental treatment."

According to [a report by the Health Policy Institute](#), financial barriers are the most common barrier experienced when it comes to receiving dental care, especially among non-elderly adults.

Balshi has a strong belief in the importance of a good smile, and even wrote a book about it called "Smile Your Heart Out."

"I have always been involved in the dental practice, but not the scientific side of it; the softer side," she said. "So, I generally get to meet the patients and talk to them about their lives and about how their smiles affect their lives and I decided that I would write about book about that subject, about how important a smile is to the human being."

The book, which took Balshi about three years to complete, takes the form of a long essay about the importance of a smile even deep within your body.

"It's not just something that's on your face and that's displayed when you open up your lips and show your teeth, it's a lot more than that," Balshi said. "It comes from very deep within you and a really good dentist will be able to put the smile on your face that is in your soul."

The true stories of 20 different people who were real patients of the Balshis at Pi are highlighted throughout the book, telling the story of how their new and improved smiles actually changed their lives.

"It's amazing how much a good smile affects a human being," Balshi said. "It's not only the physical health that's changed, it's your whole focus on life. It gives you confidence and self-assurance and all kinds of good stuff."



About Cecelia Heckman

Junior Editor-in-Chief/ Executive Content Manager of Loquitur. Digital Communications and Social Media major with a Business Administration minor. Student ambassador, Assistant Operations Manager of WYBF and show co-host, President of Alpha Lambda