News



Third-grade student Elaine Chatman-Borowiec makes a valentine to send to a veteran as part of a Catholic Schools Week activity at St. Thomas the Apostle School in Chicago Feb. 2. The students made valentines to send to veterans as part of a Catholic Schools Week activity. (CNS/Catholic New World/Karen Callaway)



by Brittany Wilmes

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Tim Uhl's podcast "Catholic School Matters" was born on the road. Uhl logs thousands of miles behind the wheel each year in his job as superintendent of Montana Catholic Schools, often listening to other podcasts while driving. Uhl oversees schools in the Great Falls-Billings and Helena Dioceses, covering the entire state, and Montana — Uhl is quick to note — is the fourth-largest state in the U.S. "It's a lot of windshield time," he said.

It was after one of these cross-state trips that Uhl realized he could host his own show. He sat down one night and made a list of "all the interesting people in Catholic education that I know or would like to know." To his surprise, he had 30 or 40 names on the list. After taking a few months to learn new technology, buy equipment and interview his first guests, Uhl launched the podcast in September 2016. Today, "Catholic School Matters" has more than 90 episodes on the airwaves and a growing, enthusiastic fan base.



Superintendent of Montana Catholic Schools Tim Uhl (Skye Hatten)

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Catholic school leaders across the country rave about Uhl's podcast and its accompanying newsletter of the same moniker, touting the show as a tool for professional development that fits easily into overbooked schedules. The podcast makes a difference because Uhl finds "the right people" to talk with him about a common topic or skill, said MaryBeth Mueller, former superintendent and executive director for the Division of Education and Evangelization for the Diocese of Phoenix. Mueller spoke with Uhl in season one of the podcast.

"A superintendent at a diocesan level can't have a handle on everything," Mueller told NCR. "That's one of the great things about Catholic educators: we're very good about developing relationships."

"Catholic School Matters" began by focusing on relationships. As Uhl has felt more comfortable with the process, he has started to plan episodes centered around a theme, like his recent "Church Documents" series. The series, published this winter, consists of 13 episodes that focus on 12 church documents on Catholic education from the Second Vatican Council to the present day. Uhl supplements the episodes with online resources, including links to further reading and questions for study, discussion and reflection. He encourages listeners to use the series as an independent study course or in a professional learning community.

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Uhl said that the "Church Documents" series has felt like a turning point in connecting with his listeners.

"I've never read most of those church documents, especially in sequential order," he said. "In this series, I say, come along with me on my learning journey. I kind-of feel like Mr. Rogers."

Now in its second year, the podcast is sponsored by the National Catholic Educational Association. The collaboration helps promote the show and newsletter to a broader audience, said NCEA president and CEO Tom Burnford.



Thomas Burnford, president of the National Catholic Educational Association, 2014 photo (CNS/courtesy of NCEA)

"Leaders in Catholic education today have to bring a deep personal faith and the academic leadership skills and business skills to run complex schools or systems of schools. It's a lot to put all of those together," said Burnford. "Tim doesn't pretend he has the answers, but he does bring in experts who do have the answers. The informational nature of the podcast allows the listener to learn along with Tim. It feels right and it works."

"Tim is a master because he puts leaders at ease," said Mueller. She said that before her retirement in August 2017 she used the podcast as a resource, revisiting episodes for inspiration and at times asking colleagues to listen to an episode so she could use it to start a discussion in meetings.

Another guest on the podcast, Mary Chase, agreed that Uhl's conversations resonate with listeners because they integrate the complex parts of school leaders' jobs. As Creighton University vice provost for enrollment management and university planning, Chase said that like many Catholic school leaders, she does the work she does because it has a greater purpose, and "Catholic School Matters" captures that shared passion.

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"I think that Catholic educators are always seeking to learn more for others and to improve themselves," she said. "The uniqueness of Tim's approach is that he understands there is a business side to this, but at the end of the day, it's about who students become and how they think about the world in which they're going to function."

Uhl said that he's enthusiastic about Catholic education because he has always been immersed in it. He attended Catholic schools from kindergarten through graduate school and has since built a career — and a following — by connecting with American Catholic school leaders and staying focused on students.



Students in the Nashville Diocese pray during a Feb. 1 Mass in celebration of Catholic Schools Week in Nashville, Tennessee. (CNS/Tennessee Register/Rick Musacchio)

"Catholic schools are places where students can come alive," Uhl said. "It's not just about educating the whole person, it's about being in a community where people care for you. In Catholic schools, students feel challenged but also feel loved."

Chase said that Uhl's curiosity and drive are evident in his podcast interviews. In Catholic education, she said, "You're worrying about actual lives. Your return on investment is an actual story. Tim communicates that extremely well, as do his guests."

Too often, wisdom about Catholic schooling resides mostly at the local level, said Burnford. He sees his job and the work of NCEA as taking that wisdom and sharing it broadly. It's a job that Uhl is happy to share as he continues to plumb the minds of Catholic school superintendents, executives and principals, publishing a new podcast episode at least every week.

Because for Uhl, the joy lies in doing the work, day in and day out. He tends to have several episodes pre-recorded and waiting for publication, and he is in talks with Burnford and others at NCEA with ideas for future series.

He'd like to take another short hiatus this summer, but the behind-the-scenes work won't really stop. He's OK with the workload, though.

"When I hit record and I'm talking to someone, then I can relax," he said.

[Brittany Wilmes is NCR engagement editor. Her email is bwilmes@ncronline.org.]

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