

# Leader in place for future NWA Catholic school

written by Alesia Schaefer |



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*John Rocha*

ROGERS — As school doors reopen and students around the state return to learning, one committee is anticipating the day it sees the doors of the area’s first Catholic high school open.

Today, the Northwest Arkansas Catholic High School planning board is one step closer to seeing that future become a reality with the hiring of John Rocha as founding president and principal.

Rocha, who helped found Western Academy, an independent, Catholic, liberal-arts school in Houston, has served as the director of development at the boys’ school since 2009.

In his tenure at Western Academy, he implemented capital campaign initiatives and raised more than \$9 million, as well as recruiting teachers and managing daily operations and communications at the school. Rocha also has more than 20 years of teaching experience in lower, middle and high school classrooms and has served as an adjunct professor of literature at the University of St. Thomas in Houston.

Rocha was chosen by a selection committee composed of parishioners from Fayetteville, Rogers and Springdale.

“John is a true visionary,” said Ashley Menendez, president of the NWACHS planning board. “He brings with him a lifelong commitment to Catholic education and invaluable experience having previously opened a Catholic independent school in Houston.”

## **Man in charge**

Rocha has had a dream of founding a Catholic high school.

“When I was in high school I felt a calling to be a teacher,” Rocha told Arkansas Catholic. “That calling has blossomed and over the years, my exposure to the Catholic faith and education through my learning career has been formative and pivotal.”

A father of 10 children, ages 3 to 21 years old, Rocha and his wife are fully immersed in Catholic education. Their oldest son attends the University of Notre Dame in Indiana while the other nine children attend Catholic high schools and elementary schools in the Houston area.

One monumental task will be to move his family that has resided in Texas for more than 15 years to northwest Arkansas. Fortunately, Razorback country will not be completely unfamiliar as Rocha’s wife, Donna Kundert, grew up at Immaculate Conception Church in North Little Rock.

Members on the selection committee said they were unanimously impressed with Rocha’s credentials, including planning board member Paul Antony, parishioner of St. Raphael Church in Springdale.

“I am very pleased with our decision. John’s past experience has been amazing in starting a new Catholic high school,” he said.

“But what I love about John,” added Antony, brother of Father John Antony who attended University of Dallas with Rocha in the 1990s, “has been his passion for Catholic education and his deep commitment to the Catholic faith.”

## **Dream becoming reality**

The idea of establishing a Catholic high school in northwest Arkansas has been a work in progress for more than two decades, but the project gained traction when Ashley Menendez, an attorney, and Dr. Adriana Stacey spearheaded the effort.

Since July 2014, following the approval of Bishop Anthony B. Taylor, the two women, who are also sisters, were given permission to establish a Catholic high school that would operate independently of the Diocese of Little Rock.

Since then, a planning board has sought to raise funds, secure land and to seek out qualified candidates to kick-start the project. In 2015, a 40-acre tract of land situated on the edge of Lowell was under contract, but the board shifted priorities and realigned their vision for the opening of the school. In early 2016, they refocused their efforts on finding a head of school to help facilitate the management of the project.

Last spring, the board voted to reach out to school families at both elementary schools, St. Joseph School in Fayetteville and St. Vincent de Paul School in Rogers, and ask for pledges that would be earmarked to hire a principal. School families and community members made pledges of \$275,000.

The school plans to collaborate with the Midwest Province of the De LaSalle Christian Brothers.

“Our guidance will be to help anchor the school in Catholicity through consultation and formation of administrators and board members in the spirit of the LaSallian charism,” said Brother Mike Fehrenbach of the Midwest Province. “We anticipate that this relationship will help us enliven the spirit of faith, a deep sense of community and a commitment to service.”

Rocha plans to travel to the area for introductory meetings with parents, parishioners and the deanery in late August. The school is scheduled to open in the fall of 2018.