

FaithLife Story: Howie Brown

Howie Brown and his wife, Jaclyn, have been members of the OMC parish for four years. They have two children: Luke is almost four and Grace is almost two. Howie is Director of Admissions at St. Joseph's Prep.

“My mother was born in Germany to Russian parents displaced by World War II. They immigrated to this country when my mother was nine months old, eventually to South Philadelphia and finally to Williamstown in South Jersey. That side of the family was Russian Orthodox. My dad grew up in Williamstown. His mother was Italian and Roman Catholic. His father was raised Protestant household but eventually converted to Catholicism after he married my grandmother.

“My parents were married in a Russian Orthodox Church near Vineland. I'm an only child and grew up in Washington Twp. NJ. Shortly after I was born, I was baptized, confirmed and had my First Communion in the Russian Orthodox Church as a baby. I occasionally attended Russian Orthodox mass with my mom growing up but don't remember going on a regular basis. My most vivid memories of the Church were all the gold and the incense!

“When I was around 8 or 9, I often spent weekends with my dad's parents and went with them to Catholic mass on Sunday mornings. When I would come home, I'd ask my parents, ‘How come we don't go to the type of church Mommom and Poppop go to?’ So, we headed to the Catholic parish about a mile away from our home, had a conversation with the Monsignor, and we began attending Mass on a regular basis at Our Lady of Lourdes (now called Mary, Mother of Mercy Parish). They enrolled me in CCD classes through the parish, I became an altar server, and I eventually received the Sacrament of Reconciliation through the CCD program. When my classmates received the Sacrament of Confirmation, I helped the bishop as an altar server.

“In middle school, my mother -- a public school teacher in Cherry Hill -- started a conversation about where I should go to high school. A colleague and good friend recommended the Prep because that's where her sons attended. When my mom and I visited the Prep for the first time, we both felt a terrific vibe there. I had never been in a place that felt so alive. I went to the Prep and it set the table for so many other things in my life. I felt like my classmates were my brothers. And the Jesuits taught the faith through the example of how they lived their lives. It seemed like such a practical way to engage with my faith. They engage people in their everyday life and meet them where they are through the context of something bigger, something greater.

“I went to Syracuse University majoring in Broadcast Journalism and Political Science. Right after graduation I actually taught middle school in Philadelphia as part of the Teach for America program for two years. Then I moved to DC where I worked in politics for a bit and eventually ended up teaching in a charter school in Northeast Washington, D.C. During this time, I was definitely more of a casual Catholic. I was also very stressed out and struggling to get a larger perspective on things both professionally and personally. I remember being at an Ash Wednesday service where something clicked. I realized later that it was an eye-opening

experience that gave me a true sense of who I was and that I was not treating myself well physically, emotionally or spiritually. It gave me a reconnection to my faith.

“I eventually came back to Philadelphia through a career in acting and producing, mostly in theatre. I felt that my casual spirit toward my faith was not cutting it anymore, was not helping me to find myself. A Prep classmate studying to be a Jesuit suggested that I check out the Contemporary Leaders In Action program being run from Old St. Joseph’s Church. This was a two-year cohort program for young professionals. We met monthly to discuss our spirituality through different books we read. The first time I went to CLIA, I opened the door for a girl who would become my wife.”

“We started going to mass together, which started a deepening of my faith. My wife is an old school Catholic, always went to mass, and is a fantastic prayer! For her, it’s always been about her personal relationship to God. She is the least judgmental person I know – she ‘doesn’t sweat the small stuff.’

“A Jesuit -- who was one of the four priests that concelebrated our wedding -- had a huge influence on me at the Prep. I remember him telling my English class my junior year that, “The greatest sin against the Holy Spirit is being boring. Our gifts are from God and they are meant to be on display and not expressing them makes you boring.’ Now I have a deeper sense of what that means: that you are meant to give purpose to a lot of the little things in life and you should never be afraid to say ‘yes’ to these little things.”