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NCAA basketball success transforms George Mason, campus minister says

By Angela E. Pometto
 Catholic News Service

ARLINGTON, Va. (CNS) – The Cinderella story of underdog George Mason University's arrival in the Final Four in the NCAA men's basketball championship has transformed the school's Fairfax campus, according to student campus minister Brian Dunleavy.

"Everyone is happy. Everyone is wearing green," he said. On March 27, there was a two-hour wait to get Final Four T-shirts. "It really has changed everybody."

George Mason's 86-84 win in overtime over top-ranked University of Connecticut March 26 propelled it into the Final Four in the National Collegiate Athletic Association championship for the first time in school history. The Patriots were to play the University of Florida April 1 in Indianapolis to determine who would go on to the championship game.

According to Dunleavy, the students have become more open and kind toward each other.

"They have pride and share the same thing," he said. "Now everyone is so close to each other. It's like a big family."

Father Bob Cilinski, pastor of All Saints Church in Manassas, served as chaplain of Catholic Campus Ministry at George Mason University for 14 years. The public university has some 29,600 students.

"There is a close relationship with the Catholic Campus Ministry and the university," he said. When the basketball team made it into the NCAA tournament in 1999, Father Cilinski was invited to travel with the team – what he called a "great experience."

With the team making it to the Final Four, Father Cilinski is excited for the entire university community. He has received phone calls from alumni who wanted to join in the excitement.

"I am taking full advantage of reconnecting with everyone who has been a part of the Catholic community at George Mason," he said. "All the goodness in the university is being celebrated through the basketball success."

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Father Cilinski is friends with head coach Jim Larranaga and his wife, Liz, and celebrated the Mass for their son's wedding.

"Coach Larranaga has been building this team for nine years by instilling values in the players on and off the court," Father Cilinski said. Larranaga attended Archbishop Molloy High School in Queens and Providence College in Rhode Island.

When senior guard Tony Skinn intentionally hit an opponent below the belt, Larranaga benched him for the rest of the game and the following game, which ended up being the team's first in the NCAA tournament. If the team hadn't won those games, George Mason wouldn't have advanced.

"He stayed with his principles and acted like a father," said Father Cilinski. "It's those sort of values that have made the team a winner."

Dunleavy sees Coach Larranaga as someone who takes his faith to the court. He is very personal with his players and also shows them great respect.

"We want to have a family atmosphere," Larranaga said of his team. He and his wife have the team over for dinner at times. He also wants to help the athletes' families feel welcome at the university. He tries to make sure they are able to attend the games.

Larranaga also works to keep team morale up. He is known for organizing team baseball games that are a chance to just get together and have fun.

Several years ago, team members were in an especially bad mood. They had just lost a big game by a few points and were stuck in the airport due to snow. Spirits were low when Larranaga crumpled up a piece of paper and taped it together to form a ball. Then, just using their arms, the team played baseball in the airport terminal.

"That totally changed the attitude and atmosphere," he said. "And we won the next night."

Father Peter Nasetta, current chaplain and director of campus ministry, was in Rome as the team advanced. He watched the games, with a seven-hour time difference, from the North American College in Rome.

According to Kathy O'Hare, administrative assistant for campus ministry, Father Nasetta, a Mason graduate, drew attention on his travels because of his George Mason apparel.

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