New Canisius College president aims to meet students 'right where they are'

Janet Gramza
Jun 30, 2022

On April 20, Canisius College held its first in-person Ignatian Scholarship...
Day since the Covid pandemic, a day when students present accepted projects and the whole campus gets a day off to see them.

Canisius junior Valeria Lee was presenting her research on the effects of temperature on Asian tiger mosquitos when a tall man in a suit and bright tie came up to ask about her project.

“I hadn’t seen him before, so I just presented my project like I would to anyone,” Lee said. “Afterward my friend said, ‘I think that was the new president.’ I was glad I didn’t know, or I would have been nervous.”

Two days later, Canisius President-elect Steve K. Stoute was on the quad when he saw Lee approaching with her mosquito traps. He greeted her by name and praised her research.

“I have such a good impression of him,” Lee said later. “He seems like such a nice...
person and so approachable. A lot of people I know have met him and we are so excited to have him.”

**People are also reading...**

1. **Buffalo Police identify victims in double shooting on Scappaquada Expressway**
2. **Made in WNY: Putting the clean in Mr. Clean Magic Eraser**
3. **Alan Pergament: WKBW's Hannah Buehler allows political analyst to give Republican commercial**
4. **Louis Ciminelli could be released in wake of Supreme Court decision**

To walk with Stoute at Canisius is to stop every few feet to greet everyone he passes. If he’s met them before, chances are he remembers their name. If he hasn’t, he introduces himself and asks about them.
His friendliness and accessibility are conscious elements of a leadership style honed from his own Catholic education that he aims to maintain no matter how busy he gets after taking over as president of Canisius on Friday.

“We must meet our students – and prospective students – where they are, with a sense of humility and empathy,” Stoute says. “That’s something I am very passionate about – communicating clearly to every student that ‘We will support you in the ways that you need to be successful.’”

At 41, Stoute is the youngest and the first person of color to lead the college in its 150-year history. He grew up in the Caribbean nation of Trinidad and Tobago, the eldest of four whose father worked in construction and mother in hospitality.

He attended Catholic school from age 10 through high school and excelled at sports. When it came time to apply to college, his goals were 1) play soccer and 2) do it at a Catholic school.

“I did my college search back when glossy brochures were still the thing – you expressed interest and waited for that brochure,” Stoute said. Seton Hall University in New Jersey fit the bill. He had family in New York who visited Trinidad often, but “my first time leaving the island was to fly into JFK to start college,” he said.

As a freshman, he met Msgr. Robert Sheeran, then president of Seton Hall. Sheeran, now 76 and retired, describes himself as “a walkaround president” and “people person” – just like Stoute is now.

“I was at the rec center one day and there was this young man at the desk,” Sheeran recalled. “I said, ‘Are you a new student?’ He said yes. I asked, ‘What do
you think of Seton Hall?’ and he gave me the most upbeat, enthusiastic response. I said, ‘What is your name?’ He said, ‘Steve Stoute.’ I said, ‘I won’t forget you.’”

Sheeran became a mentor and “father figure” who Stoute consulted on many life decisions. As Stoute embraced his Catholic faith more deeply, he attended Mass daily. He hadn’t been confirmed Catholic in Trinidad, so he requested it junior year and asked Sheeran to be his sponsor. “That was really cool,” Sheeran said.

Stoute also got involved in FOCUS, the Fellowship of Catholic University Students, which inspired him toward missionary work after graduation. He had landed a coveted yearlong NCAA internship that anyone would jump at, but Stoute was torn. He wanted to serve.

“I encouraged him to take the internship because professionally it is very, very prestigious,” Sheeran said. “I said, ‘You’ll have other chances in life to do something for God.’ And he’s doing that now as president of a Catholic college.”

[Watch Stoute describe mentoring on video at: youtube.com/watch?v=m3oAIvAy36I]

The internship in Los Angeles taught him how the NCAA runs college basketball tournaments, and how to support student athletes socially and emotionally as well as athletically and academically. That led him to the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill to earn a master’s degree in sports science while working as the athletic department’s life skills coordinator.

He also accepted Sheeran’s nomination to a three-year term on Seton Hall’s Board of Regents, which introduced him to college planning and budgeting and to older Regents including two college presidents who also became mentors, he said.
His next job, in development and alumni relations at Princeton University, cemented his interest in higher education administration. Again, he discussed his path with Sheeran.

“He advised me that as a lay person, one must get a terminal degree to become a top administrator at a college or university,” Stoute said. “So the question became, ‘What would that be?’ And I decided on a Juris Doctor (law degree).”

He went to University of Pennsylvania School of Law (acceptance rate 35%) and graduated as president of the class of 2014. He then spent three and a half years as associate at a Philadelphia law firm, not with an eye on the bar exam but to further prepare to lead a college.

In 2018, he was hired as chief of staff at DePaul University in Chicago, the nation’s largest Catholic college. In 2020 he gained the title of Vice President for Strategic Initiatives. Overseeing planning at a university of over 20,000 students on two campuses prepared him to seek a presidency at a smaller school, he said.
February, a 15-member search committee chose Stoute to succeed John Hurley as the 25th president of Canisius.

John Hurley to step down as Canisius College president next year

Hurley, who retired after 12 years as president, was known for outspoken support for women and the LGBTQ community in the Catholic church, and for taking the difficult step of cutting nearly 100 jobs to combat enrollment declines during the pandemic.

At Canisius, Stoute said his first focus will be on growing enrollment, including more students of color, first-generation college students and new Americans.

“As a first-generation college student, I recognize the challenges that come with that and how we need to provide support to students who come from different experiences,” he said.
Even before the white supremacist mass shooting that killed 10 Black neighbors at a Tops market in the same ZIP code as Canisius, Stoute was pledging outreach to the surrounding community. He said the horrific events of May 14 only “deepen my commitment to leading Canisius and engaging meaningfully with our Buffalo community.”

Under Hurley, Canisius increased its last two freshman classes to one-third students of color, up from 11%, he said. Current full-time enrollment is 2,627 -- 1,863 undergrads and 764 graduate students. Stoute says Canisius has potential to recruit more by removing barriers, directly engaging with potential students and touting its urban setting.

“We need to talk more about Canisius being an urban institution,” he said. “Many students and families want to be in an urban environment because of the culture, the diversity and the food, and Buffalo has all of those things.”

He noted that Canisius dropped its SAT and ACT requirements for admission during Covid, and he plans to keep testing optional. He wants to appeal to the interest in social justice he sees in today’s young people, “which are also core to our Jesuit, Catholic identity.”

And he wants to market an opportunity many colleges don’t offer: undergraduate research programs that offer funding to students like Valeria Lee – the environmental science major studying non-native, disease carrying mosquitos – to join faculty research teams as early as freshman year.

“Valeria’s research is a public health issue,” Stoute said. “Canisius has so many research endeavors that tie into serving and supporting the community.” At Ignatian Scholarship Day, “I talked to three students who are studying test anxiety for K-12 students and the impact that has on students who are being tested at an earlier and earlier age. I learned in 10 minutes of listening to these stories that parents shouldn’t have to battle to level the playing field for children the system has disenfranchised because of their learning styles.
“I mean, I thought I was a good student, but these students are – Wow,” he added.
“I can’t wait to meet more of them.”

By Janet Gramza
Higher Education Reporter
I'm the new Higher Education reporter on The Buffalo News business enterprise team. I previously worked at The Post-Standard/Syracuse.com and Syracuse’s Rosamond Gifford Zoo. I'm a Rochester native with family in Buffalo. Email me at jgramza@buffnews.com.