

# Spirit

FACULTY & STAFF NEWSLETTER

Special Edition  
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## *Introducing* **Katia Passerini, Ph.D.** *The 27th President of Gonzaga*

After a months-long national search, the Gonzaga Board of Trustees voted unanimously to elect Katia Passerini, Ph.D., to serve as the University's next great leader. She will succeed President Thayne McCulloh, who will step down in July 2025 after serving in the role for the past 16 years.

A native of Italy and a lifelong Catholic, Dr. Passerini is an accomplished academic and a seasoned university administrator and leader. She is currently the Provost and Senior Executive Vice President at Seton Hall University after serving as the University's Interim President during the 2023-24 academic year.

Dr. Passerini expressed her excitement about joining the University saying, "Gonzaga is clearly a very special place." Spirit asked her a few questions to help the community get to know its next president.

### **Why Gonzaga? What drew you here?**

There are many reasons to be attracted to Gonzaga, and I have admired its national and international initiatives in many academic areas and athletics. I was particularly impressed with the excellent programs across schools, especially in professions that make a difference in people's lives. Gonzaga is Jesuit, Catholic and Humanistic, and each one of these adjectives connected to the noun "university" refers to a special place devoted to teaching, learning and the holistic formation of students, which Gonzaga does so well, powered by its Jesuit mission and tradition. The attention to the common good permeates any materials I have read about the University. When I visited, it became abundantly clear that these were not just words printed on paper, but the lived experiences of many. Of course, the incredible location with stunning landscapes and beautiful mountains makes Spokane an ideal place for learning and reflection. I am not surprised about how many students and employees intentionally choose Gonzaga as their perfect learn/work/pray destination.

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# Passerini

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## What drew you to education and what would you want our community to know about your belief in its power?

Education is a mission; it transforms the lives of multiple generations and enables individuals to self-actualize and make choices to drive their destiny rather than being driven by circumstances or by others. This sense of agency makes this mission so compelling to me. I have been immersed in educational environments early in my life, observing my parents, who started their careers as elementary school teachers in Rome, Italy. I think I was “socialized” into learning and education as a career choice by this upbringing and seeing my parents moving from teaching to superintendent positions within the Italian Department of Education.

However, a more complete understanding of its transformative power hit me about ten years ago when I visited public high schools in New York City to find which schools my kids could apply to. I was startled by a phrase from one of our founding fathers that appears prominently in the doorway of James Madison High School in Brooklyn. It says, “Education is the foundation of civil liberty,” which means education is the foundational antecedent of progress and prosperity for all and the best way to bestow and protect liberty and enable

sound governance. That understanding further encouraged me to move beyond teaching and research in a full-time faculty role to pursue an administrative career in Higher Education. Higher Ed institutions are knowledge creation hubs, and knowledge is one of the few factors of production that increases when it is shared. Universities represent the cradles of knowledge building and sharing; they were designed to capture and transfer traditional knowledge and to create new knowledge, enabling society’s growth and advancement. They anchor societies in their past while enabling better understanding and opening opportunities for the future.

## What reading material is on your nightstand or in your audio queue?

A couple of books. On the nightstand, “He Leadeth Me: An Extraordinary Testament of Faith,” by Walter J. Cizek, S.J. and Daniel L. Flaherty S.J. In the audio queue is “Talking to Strangers” by Malcolm Gladwell. On my commute, I enjoy listening to the Hidden Brain podcasts, which I find fascinating for their translational power, making complex research findings accessible to a larger audience.

## What do you do for fun?

My kids say “nothing” because I do not take much time to disconnect from work.

I have always believed more in work-life integration as opposed to work-life balance. However, when I disconnect, I enjoy rollerblading. I also used to enjoy skiing while growing up, so I am excited about possibly returning to that passion in the greater Spokane area.

## Would you like to share anything about your family (including furry members)?

There is a sense of excitement about the West Coast, a new experience for my family. My husband Arturo was born and raised in New York. Our oldest son, Luis, was born in Rome and came back to the U.S. at the age of two. Michelangelo is a senior in College and lives in Chicago. Diego is finishing middle school in NYC. During COVID, we rescued two cats, Mezzanotte and Cenere (named Midnight and Ash because of their colors), and they constantly play with our 8-year-old Shorkie, named Sharkie.

## All-time favorite song or band?

English – Depeche Mode; Italian – Franco Battiato

## How ready are you for the experience of the Kennel at a basketball game?

I am anxiously waiting for the actual experience. Based on the YouTube videos I have seen, I am sure the live version beats any virtual display or imagination.



## Celebrating with President McCulloh

*Here are several ways Gonzaga will celebrate with Thayne through this last semester of his presidency*

**Special Website** You’ll find stories and photos, an upcoming series of podcast conversations with Thayne, and features from Gonzaga Magazine and other publications. Plus, you’ll have the opportunity to add your own special memories or well-wishes.

### Spring Events

Expect to see an interesting twist on some of our usual programs, including:

- **Gonzaga Day:** Feb. 22 (Senior night and last home games for WBB and MBB)
- **WCC Tournament:** March 7-10 (Las Vegas)
- **Zags Give Day:** March 6 (an online day of giving with a special emphasis)

### Special Occasions

- **Ignatian Gala:** April 10 (ticketed, black-tie event: [gonzaga.edu/gala](http://gonzaga.edu/gala))
- **Campus Celebration:** May 2 (tentative) for all faculty, staff and students

*Watch for additional information to come in Morning Mail.*

# Reilly Takes the Reigns

## *‘Honored’ to Serve as Board of Trustees Chair*

Chair of the Board of Trustees is an important role at Gonzaga – and it’s one **Mike Reilly (’81)** never expected to hold. The reason dates back to his junior year on campus in 1979.

Reilly was Resident Director of Roncalli House, an all-male dormitory which had a bit of a campus reputation for pranks.

“Along the first-floor hallway of College Hall, back then, portraits of all the university Trustees were posted,” Reilly reminisces. “When we knew the Trustees were coming to campus for a meeting, we secretly took down their pictures and replaced them with photos of Roncalli residents.” He laughs and adds, “Much to the chagrin of the Trustees.”

Twenty-year-old Reilly may not have thought he would one day lead the trustees after that harmless prank, but present-day Reilly says, “I’m honored to do so.”

An employment attorney in Seattle for nearly four decades at Ballard Spahr, a national firm of 750 attorneys, Reilly has deep ties to the Gonzaga and Spokane communities. Reilly graduated from Gonzaga Prep and came to GU on a debate scholarship. He and his wife Trea recently moved back to Spokane. They have one daughter, Jackie, who is a comedy writer in Los Angeles.

Reilly previously served as Chair of Gonzaga’s Board of Regents and became a member of the Board of Trustees in 2016. For the last three years he has served as Vice Chair of Gonzaga’s Board of Trustees. Through it all, he has remained a fervent supporter of the University and everything it represents.

“Gonzaga has always been an important part of my life,” Reilly says. “The holistic approach to education not only provides excellent academics, but it also nurtures the soul and informs us of important values to guide us.”

“You really get to know people,” he continues. “I formed strong connections with students and faculty, and I made lifelong friends.”

Reilly says the Jesuit values instilled during his time as a student continue to inform his approach to daily life. “At Gonzaga, we learn about ‘Ignatian presupposition,’ to assume goodwill before anything else,” he says. “Over the years that approach has helped me hear and understand different opinions of others.”

Reilly has served on a number of other boards, from Gonzaga Prep to the American Red Cross. He says that drive comes from his Gonzaga debate team coach, **Sister Mary Margaret Conway** who once asked him, “Who are you becoming for other people, not just yourself?” That stuck with Reilly, always in the back of his mind, as he volunteered for his communities.

Now newly in charge of the top governing entity at the University, Reilly recognizes the opportunity in front of him, especially as Gonzaga undergoes a presidential transition.

“First things first, we get to celebrate a fantastic leader,” he says. “President McCulloh has been transformational and inspiring at Gonzaga in too many ways to list, and both he and the Board have a set of tasks to finish before he leaves.” Reilly points specifically to Dr. McCulloh’s leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic, “A time when other universities were laying off employees and grappling with the repercussions of shutting down campuses.”

“Dr. McCulloh showed incredible courage,” he continues. “To say, ‘We are going back to school, we are not laying people off and we are going to take a measured risk.’ Dr. McCulloh’s leadership showed that Gonzaga is a community that cares for its students, and its faculty and staff.”



With a new president on the horizon, Reilly says the goal remains the same – to ensure Gonzaga is the best it can be. “We need to continue to ask ourselves how the University can be better, more relevant, more desired and more innovative, with a new leader.”

The groundwork is already there, he says, referring to the recently updated strategic vision. “I’m excited to see our new leader come in and build on the great foundation Gonzaga has already.”

And, of course, he knows all this must be done with the students’ experience in mind. Reilly says it wasn’t so much any individual class or moment he had on campus that ultimately made him who he is. “I just remember how Gonzaga made me feel. It empowered me to be a better person and, hopefully, a more enlightened individual.”

“What motivates me? I’ve realized at my age, I may not be able to change the world,” he muses. “But the Trustees, the administration, faculty and the staff can definitely change the world of a student, and that student might just go out and change the world.”

Reilly’s picture is no longer displayed on the first floor of College Hall as part of a dormitory prank. It now occupies a more permanent place at the top of the Board of Trustees, and it’s a role he is more than ready to take on.



# Sowing the Seeds of Leadership

*Christy Larsen Reflects on Time as Gonzaga's First Female Chair of the Board of Trustees*

On any given day you might find **Christy Larsen ('88)** elbow deep in dirt, wrangling a herd of goats or sitting in a Gonzaga Board of Trustees meeting helping determine the direction of the University.

The mortgage executive-turned-farmer served as GU's first female chair of the Board of Trustees for the past three years, leading through countless big moments and challenges – most recently selecting and chairing the committee that ultimately decided Gonzaga's next president.

It's a role she took very seriously.

"Our goal was to be thoughtful, deliberate and methodical," she says. "Higher education is a unique landscape; you have to understand the economics of it and the challenges that come with it."

After more than a decade serving the University in various roles, Larsen is well-traveled in this particular landscape, in both the good and the bad. It was with her at the helm that Gonzaga was able to transition back to some sense of normalcy after the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. In September 2022, Larsen was selected by President Thayne McCulloh to represent the University and meet Pope Francis, a moment she called the "experience of a lifetime."

Then in May 2024, Larsen played a critical role in celebrating the 60th anniversary of Gonzaga-in-Florence, a program she's always felt a particular kinship with from the moment she set foot on campus as a student.

Through all she's experienced, Larsen maintains McCulloh's appointment as the first lay president was a defining moment for the University.

"That was a major change for the institution," Larsen says. "It was the breakthrough that led to hundreds of other breakthroughs."

McCulloh opened the door for change and, in turn, pushed Gonzaga's appeal outside the bounds of the Pacific Northwest.

"McCulloh has been an incredible president. He deeply cares about this institution." She says this knowing the University is now on the precipice of another standout moment, the first new president in 16 years.

"Our job was not to replace him or remedy the things we think he didn't do well. It was to find someone else who understands the landscape."

Larsen never was a typical board chair.

As the first woman to hold the position in Gonzaga's history – her appointment was a breakthrough in itself.

"I'm so very proud," she says, "to be a part of an institution that recognizes leadership qualities regardless of gender."

"It was a big deal – for her and the institution," says **Pat Reese**, a senior principal giving officer in University Advancement. "And although she has had to navigate some challenges, which isn't uncommon for board chairs, she's handled them thoroughly and thoughtfully. She's a good listener, a collaborator and a critical thinker."

"I think the most important thing about it," Larsen says, "is that other young women will see that if they're authentic to who they are, their talents will be recognized."

Larsen's skillset is unique – ranging between the likes of Julia Child and Mike Rowe's "Dirty Jobs." Not two people you'd typically read about in the same sentence, but Larsen, taking a few characteristics from each and many more, is truly one of a kind.

After starting her professional career in the mortgage business and retiring in 2001, Larsen turned to her roots for guidance on what to do next. At the heart of her Italian family is a deep love and appreciation for good food. She calls them "fabulous cooks" and tells stories of waking up on Sunday mornings to the warm aroma of Sunday supper already slow-roasting in the oven.

Sizzling olive oil, roasted garlic and the crackling crust of fresh baked bread – her next steps seemed obvious. In 2003, Larsen enrolled in the California School of Culinary Arts specializing in pastry and baking.

"Cooking has always been an important part of my life," she continues, saying her mother taught her to value real, whole foods. She graduated from culinary school and eventually decided she needed to know exactly where her food came from.

"It started with me wanting to control what we ate." It then spiraled into what she calls the farming starter package. "A couple of chickens, goats and dogs. Lo and behold, two years later, you've got a hundred animals and you're eating year-round off your land."

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# Larsen

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Larsen and her husband Mike, who comes from a family of cranberry growers and cheesemakers, did just that on a plot of land, off the beaten path, in San Miguel, Calif. They call it Vicarious Ranch, after friends and family repeatedly told them they wanted to live vicariously through them.

They've embraced the name, but Larsen says farming is not nearly as glamorous as it's made out to be, especially on social media.

"People have this idea that you wake with the sun and do some yoga with baby goats and you're a farmer!" She's laughing, but says the truth is a little grimmer. "You are dirty most of the time, you're exhausted all the time and things never go the way you want them to." She smiles before adding, "But that's the beauty of it, right?"

A lifelong lesson in taking control and letting go of it too.

Now with the presidential search behind her, Larsen is stepping down with three years as board chair under her belt. She believes her future role at Gonzaga is one of support.

"I still see myself as someone who is responsible for making sure the University continues on the right trajectory," Larsen says. "But I'm no longer in charge, so I will follow the lead of the new president and the new chair, **Mike Reilly ('81)**, and I will support them as best I can."

To the University as a whole, Larsen is grateful: "For being supportive throughout the search, for being open and honest with the team and giving us the parameters to determine our next great president."

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*"It's evident to me we have a place where everybody deeply cares about the institution and the students. I just want to say I see it, I recognize it and I appreciate it."*



## What's Next?

Dr. Passerini will begin her presidency on July 15, 2025, with inauguration ceremonies to take place this fall.

For more information on Gonzaga's 27th president visit: [gonzaga.edu/27](http://gonzaga.edu/27)