

Tales from the Trenches:

What I've Learned in My Role as Northwest Catholic's Webmaster

By Michelle M. Murphy

mmurphy@nwcath.org

- **Don't bite off more than you can chew!** If you are going to commit to an electronic presence, you must commit to allocating the necessary resources (human more than financial) to keeping it fresh. Better to start small/narrowly focused with something manageable than to launch a powerful, fancy web site without designating someone who will be responsible for it. (This may even mean that you decide internally to change out photos only every quarter, or every semester ... if you start updating them too often, people come to expect that and are disappointed when they see the same pics - it may also convey that the rest of the site isn't refreshed, either, and is therefore not worth their time and attention.)
- **Buy a high-quality, easy-to-use camera.** Good web sites *need* good pictures, and the quality needed for a web photo is much higher even than for print. Invest in a web photography class to understand how to take and edit the pictures that will show up best on your site.
- **Have the camera always charged, with an empty camera card, ready to use - and assign someone to take the pictures.** The best photos are not necessarily those from predictable, staged events, like spring assemblies, Halloween parties, or Breakfast with Santa - although of course these are necessary. You also want numerous candid shots of your teachers and students doing what they do best: Engaging. Learning. Laughing. Hugging. This is what depicts the life of your school, what conveys its personality ... so you must delegate a house photographer whose duty is to always be ready to drop what they are doing, grab the camera, and capture those Kodak moments.
- **Print out copies of the best pictures for bulletin board display - and include a sign saying "More great photos available on our web site!"** This helps to build awareness and traffic to the site.
- **Ask for photos from others.** Let your parents know that you are hungry for good-quality photos that capture the array of activities and people in your school community. Promise photo credit (but not money) to any you use - and make it clear that you always reserve the right to edit or reject submissions.
- **Invest in an external hard drive to house the photos.** Pictures take up a lot of room on servers, so if you are pressed for space, this is a great way to keep hundreds of photos handy without clogging up the rest of your network. Also, you can move the hard drive around - to home or another office - which means the webmaster can be working on pictures even when not at work. (It also means you might be able to recruit a separate, volunteer (?) photo editor.)
- **Consider an outside photo storage site, such as Snapfish.** This is another great way to organize lots of photos, with access by more than one person, without taking up server space.

- **Ensure that you have permission to use your students' images on your web site.** Many parents are (understandably) squeamish about having their children's faces on the internet. Make sure that your photo permission slips, generally distributed at the beginning of each school year, include specific reference to using the images on the internet. Some parents will qualify their permission with "Only if name is not used" or other conditions; at NWC, we use photos of only those students whose parents have given unequivocal permission.
- **Designate a webmaster.** In many schools, this is someone who also does something else ... best to zero in on the most technologically savvy (or technologically interested) person on your staff who seems likely to be the quickest study and/or the most innately interested in having your school's web presence be the best it can be. Ideally, this person should also be able to convey excitement and enthusiasm about the site to others - which, in turn, should elicit more photos and more info/ideas re: how to make it better.
- **Keep your content BRIEF, and cross-reference** (i.e. provide links) to as much other info as possible, even if it means driving people off your site. The web site attention span is much shorter than the newspaper or magazine attention span.
- **Decide what, if any, approval process the webmaster needs for posting new content.** Time is of the essence more with web sites than with traditional press releases sent to print media; therefore, if the webmaster is not going to be granted permission to post without approval, there should be institutional acceptance of the need to respond very quickly to proposed copy or photos.
- **Get it right.** Dates, times, the spelling of names - people will never forget (or forgive you) if they go to the wrong place on the wrong day at the wrong time ... or if you misspell their children's names. So simple, yet so critically important. Do you want to be a place that's known for excellence in everything, including the "little" details of life, or a place that's "close enough?"
- **Keep your papers in order ... which gets back to the need for a webmaster.** Our web address, www.northwestcatholic.org, was "bought" and paid for long before I started my job. I learned the hard way that I should have made sure that ALL paperwork related to the web site was with me. Imagine my shock when, one day in October, our web site simply disappeared - the address literally taken hostage by a web address predator who (I discovered) makes a living by watching and waiting for addresses to expire, snatches them up (in our case, from GoDaddy.com), and demands ransom to get it back. We paid. But it still took about 30 hours from the time our site disappeared until it was back up, just the way we left it (thank God). I now have a tickler on my calendar for the next expiration date!
- **Enjoy and have fun with your site!** Your web site is your school's front door, as important (if not more so) to the "first impression" of your place as your building's literal front door. A clean, inviting, easy-to-read and -navigate web site, filled with photos of happy students, teachers, and parents, is the first and most powerful indication that your school is not only a terrific community, but is also modern enough to recognize, invest in, and harness the power of the internet via that professional-looking web site. Once you get it up and running, you will become addicted to the idea of keeping it fresh! It will truly become a joy, not a burden.