

# It's the Small Things

HOW BR. JAMES E. SMALL, SJ, KEEPS THE IGNATIAN SPIRIT ALIVE AT LOYOLA ACADEMY WITH SMILES, PAINT BRUSHES, AND KIND WORDS

by George Kearney



Br. Small celebrates his birthday with Courtney Stucker, one of his first art students who has maintained a close relationship with him. He even has a part in her upcoming wedding. "I have known Br. Small since I was nine years old. He became a trusted advisor—if I had a dilemma, I would call and ask for advice. He always reminded me to put the situation in God's hands and lift it up to Him. I always felt much more peaceful after talking with Br. Small."

**P**OPE PAUL III asked St. Ignatius Loyola to send Jesuit representatives to the Council of Trent, which was called to respond to the Protestant Reformation. Ignatius asked three Jesuits to attend, and in his letter to them he asked that, in addition to their work at the Council, they make time to preach, hear confessions, visit the sick and poor, catechize children, and give the Spiritual Exercises. Even in the midst of one of the most critical moments in the history of the Church, Ignatius asked his Jesuits to focus their attention on the small things. Today Br. James E. Small, SJ, is doing the same thing.

It's 3:52 a.m. on a cold spring morning. The rest of the world is still asleep, wrapped in warm sheets and blankets, when Br. Jim Small, 84, gets out of bed. Outside Loyola Academy, the Jesuit high school where Br. Small has worked as a carpenter since 1969, a few cars streak past on the empty Edens Expressway. Br. Small moves quickly around the room shutting off each of his alarm clocks. He doesn't want the alarms to wake any of the Jesuits who live in adjacent rooms.

Br. Small, who served in the Navy during World

War II and as a Chicago police officer before becoming a Jesuit, always gets up this early. "I just have a lot to do," he says. "I never seem to be able to get everything done in a day." He entered the Jesuit novitiate in Milford, OH, in 1952, after the sight of a dead body in a Chicago hospital inspired him to do something more with his life. In 1969 he was assigned to Loyola Academy. Two pages aren't nearly enough to detail Br. Small's lifetime of contributions to the school. For many years, as the resident carpenter, he almost singlehandedly cared for the sprawling campus. He made sure classrooms were outfitted for school in the fall. He cleaned the building and repaired broken desks, windows, pencil sharpeners, and benches. He even plowed snowy parking lots.

As a child, Jim Small had many hobbies. He played stickball in the prairie—an empty lot near his home on the South Side of Chicago. He sold newspapers until he had enough money to buy a camera. Then he converted the coal storage room in his parents' basement into a darkroom to develop his photos. He enjoyed drawing, and when he entered the Jesuits he met other artists who introduced him to oil painting.

At Loyola, he used the little bits of free time he had to paint. Then, in 1970, he found a way to use his art to help the school when Loyola's president, Fr. John Reinke, SJ, hosted the school's first Ramble fundraiser. Reinke invited parents, alumni, and donors to Loyola for a formal dinner and auction. Thirty-six of Br. Small's paintings were included as silent auction items. A local wine distributor bought every single one of them. Each of the last 35 years since, Br. Small has contributed somewhere between 60 and 100 paintings to the Ramble.

Br. Small's remarkable output is the result of his unique approach to art. He rarely paints original pieces. Instead, he copies the work of more renowned artists like Claude Monet, Auguste Renoir, and Norman Rockwell. But he doesn't make exact copies. He often paints the faces of friends or Loyola students into his pictures. He also does portraits of folks he knows.

Br. Small's goal was never to sell art, but he's sold

close to 100 paintings at the Ramble in each of the last 10 years. He also paints commissioned pieces. Demand for his work jumped after it was featured on NBC's *Today Show* in 1997. Most of the paintings sell for between \$300 and \$400. Some sell for more than \$2,500, and he once sold a commissioned wedding portrait for \$3,500. All the proceeds go to the school. Br. Small doesn't know what exactly the money is used for, though he knows most of it goes to students who couldn't afford to attend Loyola without financial aid. Loyola's president, Fr. Ted Munz, SJ, insists that if a deserving young man or woman wants to attend Loyola, finances shouldn't stand in their way.

Br. Small also custom frames each of his paintings and has developed a business framing art for others. He operates out of his basement workshop at Loyola and builds frames when he's not doing work for the school or painting. The framing business also makes a fair bit of money. Br. Small hands all of it over to the school along with his salary. Each year he gives close to \$100,000 to Loyola from these sources. No one has kept track of how much he's donated over his lifetime. It's a large number, but it means very little to Br. Small.

When asked about the money, he says, "I find great happiness in my relationship with God, and I try to get closer to God everyday. I try to work for him. But, I can always feel him working in my life. In the most simple things I do, I can feel he is helping me. Nobody knows about most of the things I do at school. I like it that way. I like to do things like fix a window when nobody knows it was me. But the Lord knows, and that's the most important thing to me."

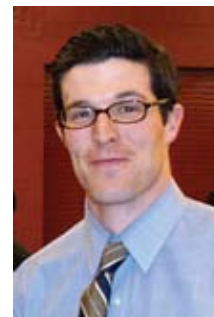
While Br. Small's work as a carpenter and artist has done much for the school, few would say it's his most important work. He's known throughout the school, by students, parents, teachers, coaches, and his colleagues on the maintenance staff, as a wonderfully generous, kind, and loving human being. His kindness, most say, is his greatest contribution to Loyola.

"The whole idea of St. Ignatius is this, in a nutshell, in a sentence: I want to save my soul, and I want to help others to do the same," Br. Small says. "Now, I'll be honest; I don't think about that every hour of the day or every time I do something, but I have tried to make it a way of life. Without concentrating on it all the time and in every situation, you can do it if you live your life properly and you love people. You'll know what to do for them. Also, people watch your actions, sometimes consciously and sometimes subconsciously. And they can tell if you are a good person or a bad person, and if you are a good person you can sway them to try to live a good life too, because you are happy and at peace, and you are living a good life."

Br. Jim Small does the small things for others. He remembers names. He stops to talk. His door is always open. He looks out for those students who are lost or forgotten or picked on. They know they have a friend in him. He cares about the people he works with, the teachers and the students. He even takes care of animals. He has a collection of pet birds that have been cast off by others living in his basement workshop. He teaches free art classes for children and adults on the weekend. He has cared for ill and recuperating priests and brothers in the school's Jesuit community. When students lock their keys in their cars or need a jump start, they go find him. He does heavily discounted framing for all of Loyola's teachers—if he charges them at all. When he makes his way into Loyola's busy hallways, many of the students call out their hellos to him. He says hello to everybody and smiles.

Mother Theresa once said, "To smile at someone who is sad; to visit even for a little while, someone who is lonely; to give someone shelter from the rain with our umbrella; to read for someone who is blind: these and others can be small things, very small things, but they are appropriate to give our love of God concrete expression at all."

That's what Jim Small is doing when he paints, when he walks Loyola hallways, when he frames pictures. It seems he's doing exactly what St. Ignatius Loyola would've wanted him to do. ■



*George (G.R.) Kearney, a graduate of Loyola Academy and Georgetown University, is the author of The Small Things about Br. Jim Small, SJ, and is currently writing a book about Cristo Rey Jesuit High School.*



Br. Small keeps busy during his long days at Loyola Academy where he serves as a master carpenter, janitor, and friendly face to any student. Besides all these duties, Br. Small also paints and frames over 100 pictures a year, which are consistently one of the most popular items in the auction at Loyola's fundraiser, the Ramble.