

The Leader

A newsletter for benefactors, alumni, and friends of Saint Mary's University



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FGI benefactors become second family

John '67 and Mary (Yule) CST'69 Jelinek had never seen Jessica Salas-Rivera '19 in person until she walked across the commencement stage.

The Minnetonka couple had philanthropically supported Salas-Rivera throughout her educational journey as a Saint Mary's First Generation Scholar.

Although they had exchanged cards and letters through the years, the opportunity to meet never presented itself ... until commencement.

"On graduation day, I actually bumped into Mr. Jelinek before I even found my parents and I remember him introducing himself to me and telling me that he was proud of me," Salas-Rivera said. "When those words came out of his mouth, I felt a warm feeling in my chest because even though I did not know him personally, he felt like family."

Salas-Rivera said that when she was younger, attending a four-year college was never in her plans. Then, as a middle schooler, she began to dream when a guidance counselor told her about the opportunity to attend Saint Mary's summer college preparation program called Countdown to College. Once

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Jelinek and Salas-Rivera families

Benefactors become family ...

accepted into the program, she was told she could apply for the First Generation Initiative Scholarship.

“On April 1, 2015, my cousin gave me an envelope that had the Saint Mary’s logo on it,” she remembers. “It was around the time when we were told that we were going to receive the response to whether we were awarded the scholarship or not, but it was also April Fool’s Day and I was afraid of it being a prank. When I opened the envelope, I just remember reading the word ‘congratulations’ and I began to cry and my cousin had to finish reading it for me.”

The Jelineks said it was important for them to watch Salas-Rivera cross the stage. “She was the first in her family and so was I when I graduated,” John said. “I understood what it meant to have parents and family there. My dad died when I was 12 years old. So my mom put me through school. I probably don’t know all of the sacrifices she made.”

Mary believes their bond was strengthened that day. “As much as you are committed to helping that person, when you haven’t actually met them, there’s a distance there and once you’ve exchanged hugs and been able to look each other in the eye, it’s a real connection,” she said.

The Jelineks have felt so fulfilled in their donation, they are committed to supporting an incoming FGI student and taking the journey again. They have found it an incredibly meaningful way to give back.



John '67 and Mary (Yule) CST'69 Jelinek with First Generation Initiative graduate Jessica Salas-Rivera '19.

“It was the idea of giving a hand up to somebody who may not have had the opportunities that both John and I had when we were making our college choices, wanting to pass on the gift of education that we have had to a new family, and just feeling really committed to the idea of leaving the world better than we found it,” Mary said.

John agrees and says simply, “We can give back what life, Saint Mary’s, and God has given us.”

Salas-Rivera will never forget the Jelineks.

“If it wasn’t for them and their investment in my education, crossing that stage would have been more of a dream than a reality,” she said. “I was able to thank them in person for believing in me. My parents were also able to talk to them and thank them for helping to see their first born achieve a milestone that they did not have the opportunity to achieve. The Jelineks and other

donors were able to remove a financial burden off of my parents’ shoulders and for that I will be forever grateful.”

Mary, who taught at a Catholic elementary school throughout her career, was excited to hear that Salas-Rivera will be teaching second grade in the elementary school she once attended, Sojourner Truth Academy. They know their gift will have a ripple effect.

“I think it’s wonderful that Saint Mary’s has committed to having a program like this that can really make a difference in the lives of these young people and the communities they come from,” Mary said. “I’m familiar with the school she will be teaching at, and there are a lot of needs on the north side of Minneapolis. Those kids need the kind of teacher I believe Jessica will become.”

“We helped her, and now this lady is going to help how many kids in her lifetime. It’s just passing it all down,” John said. “It’s the concept of stewardship. It’s the right thing to do.”