

A Big Leap Forward

by MICHAEL BRADLEY photography by CATALANO STUDIO

When Holy Ghost Prep student Jack Elliott signed up to spend a couple days learning more about accounting and business consulting at Ernst & Young's Philadelphia office, he never thought he would need a tuxedo. Sure, he'd have to dress professionally and look sharp, but a tux?



Bob Watters (center), a 1981 Holy Ghost Prep graduate, hosted current students Jack Elliott (left) and Matt Doucette (right) at Ernst & Young as part of the school's LEAP program.

"I don't own one," Elliott says. "I had to rent one."

High school juniors generally reserve their interactions with the formalwear world for proms, but by connecting with Holy Ghost alum Bob Watters '81 and getting a chance to attend EY's Entrepreneur of the Year Award ceremony at the Kimmel Center in Philadelphia, Elliott and classmate Matt Doucette stepped into the upper reaches of corporate society for an evening.

"It was a pretty eye-opening experience," says Elliott, who will graduate next spring. "We met a lot of people and learned about what makes them successful."

Elliott and Doucette's arcs intersected Watters' as part of Holy Ghost's Leadership Externship Advantage Program (LEAP), which partners Ghost juniors with alumni who have succeeded in the professional world. The program was begun in 2015 by HGP president Gregory J. Gerson '79 with the goal of giving students

the opportunity to learn about fields that interest them, so that they'll have better ideas about the types of colleges to which they will apply and the course paths they prefer to study. Fifteen students took part in the program during the 2015-16 school year, a number that swelled to 30 last year. Gerson is hopeful that 45 will participate in 2017-18. Students who apply for LEAP are asked to write short essays explaining their motivation, the better to provide insight into their thought processes.

spent time with tax consultants, networked with several other HGP alumni whose careers included advisory, tax and assurance services, and sat in on a discussion of an IPO in the renewable energy industry. The experience was one-of-a-kind for the students, and their ability to move smoothly in the business setting provided a good advertisement for Holy Ghost. In fact, Watters reports that after meeting the students, one of his colleagues considered sending their son to Ghost.

Mason El-Habr '18 didn't have the chance

and Baum programmed boards to show sample displays that might appear in restaurants or hotels and then posted their work to the company's internal YouTube channel.

"I enjoyed giving them the opportunity," Kuhn says. "Any kid we can lure into engineering is good for us."

El-Habr has wanted to be in a STEM field since beginning at Holy Ghost after leaving Buckingham Friends School. His work with Oat Foundry gave him the kind of real-world experience he hopes will assist him in narrowing his focus of study.

"Mark (Kuhn) was extremely helpful," El-Habr says. "Whenever he was working on some kind of process or having a discussion about the company, he went out of his way to describe what was happening. He was very receptive to us and willing to explain things."

Joe Pargola '96 was able to provide his LEAP student Ryan Parsons with a trifecta of sorts at the New Jersey Department of Children and Families. Over last Christmas break, Parsons spent three days with Pargola, the assistant director of policy and regulatory development who was able to set him up with one-on-one meetings that exposed Parsons to a variety of areas that appealed to him.

"He said his interests were in law, government, and politics, and it was great that he could be here," says Pargola, who is a member of Holy Ghost's Alumni Association Board. "We do legal work and research. We are a governmental entity, so there are many facets to what we do."

Parsons sat in on a budget

meeting, took a tour of the state house, and was able to get a historical perspective on New Jersey and understand better how government was structured. In turn, he represented HGP quite well.

"He showed himself exceptionally," Pargola says. "Everybody was impressed when they found out he could have been home sleeping but he came in. He listened and asked good questions. It was a testament to his family and Holy Ghost."

And he didn't even have to wear a tuxedo to do it. ■



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"This piggybacks nicely with juniors who are attending career days when alums come in to talk about professions," Gerson says. "The externship for a few days can provide a spark when they speak with college guidance counselors. It's a cumulative impact that allows them to be more informed."

Watters learned of about LEAP in his role as a member of the school's Board of Trustees. He was enthusiastic about the opportunity to give back to Holy Ghost, and more importantly, to impact students directly.

"From the first time I heard about the program, I was extremely interested," Watters says. "I thought it would be great to help Holy Ghost Prep students formulate their career aspirations and to think about what they want to study."

During their two days with Ernst & Young, Elliott and Doucette met the firm's partners,

to wear a tuxedo during his time with Oat Foundry, which has a simple motto: "We Build Cool Stuff." How could any high school student, particularly one like El-Habr, who is interested in engineering and computer science, not want to hang out at a company like that? He spent two days in June with Oat Foundry CEO Mark Kuhn '08, along with Anthony Baum '18, and came away quite impressed.

"It was really cool," he says. "We got to work with and contribute to the company. They set us up on our own, gave us equipment, and allowed us to create something interesting."

One of the many "cool" things that Oat Foundry creates are "split flap" display boards, like the ones that are found in train stations and airports and which flip numbers and letters to present various messages. El-Habr

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