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**School Construction**

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**The Heights School  
 Potomac, Maryland**

*By Jennifer Walker-Journey*

The Heights School in Potomac, Maryland, is surrounded by symbolism, from the statue of a teenaged Jesus with his mother to the school's elaborate crest and its four clan symbols. It is these signs of faith that resonate through this all-male Catholic school and serve as a constant reminder that relationships are the center of this institution.

"Educating young men depends on the quality of our teaching and ultimately on the quality of our relationships: the student/teacher relationship, the parent/teacher relationship, the students' relationships with each other, and especially the relationship developed before the tabernacle and lived through work done well and offered to God," said The Heights Headmaster Alvero de Vicente.

Incorporating this theme into every aspect of the school was a key element as the institution began to grow over the years.

The Heights was founded in 1969 by a group of Catholic lay professionals and fathers who were inspired by the teachings of St. Josemaria Escriva, the founder of Opus Dei (Work of God), an organization within the Catholic Church. Originally located in the District's Cathedral Heights neighborhood, the K-12 school moved to Garrison Street in northwest D.C. and, in 1983, relocated to its current Maryland suburban campus.

In 1990, as the school began to mature and enrollment grew, it turned to Bowie Gridley Architects for a master plan that focused on facility and infrastructure needs. Bowie Gridley Architects, located in historic Georgetown, is particularly noted for achievements as planners and designers of educational institutions. Bowie Gridley later returned to complete two additional projects for The Heights, including a two-story lower school classroom building and a large library addition with a multipurpose room.

As The Heights entered the 21st century, the Board of Directors, under the leadership of Chairman Denis Harper and de Vicente, began strategic planning that focused on a new upper school building and chapel.

"We had to bring the facility up to the caliber of the teaching," Harper said. "The goal was always to keep the focus on the mission of educating young men, not the building. The physical space had to be guided by our mission of partnering with parents to educate their sons."

In 2004, Bowie Gridley partnered with The Heights once again, collaborating with liturgical architect Henry H. Menzies of New Rochelle, New York, on a master plan update to focus on academic, administrative, and athletic needs. This plan called for major academic expansion that included both an addition of a new building as well as renovation of existing space. A year later, the plan was approved and construction began.

This project included an upper school addition with classrooms, science labs, student common spaces, and an all-school administration wing. A new chapel with a balcony seating 250 also was included.

The campus sits on 20 acres of forest land across from Cabin John State Park. The new building would sit at the highest point, overlooking the lower school's log cabins in the valley below. The heavily wooded grounds are considered part of the school's identity, so school officials asked that the architects maintain as much of the forested grounds as possible.

"Site topography presented some challenges, which were overcome by citing the building into the sloped terrain," said Principal Architect Paul R. Lund, AIA, LEED AP. Lund served as project manager of The Heights project and Calvert S. (Cal) Bowie, AIA, served as the Principal in Charge.

The three-story addition, set into the sloped site, houses the main entry that leads to a central lobby. The chapel, with a balcony and sacristy, sits adjacent to the lobby, providing easy access from the main entry. This level also holds a large administrative wing.

The second level holds classrooms, and the third floor includes a three-bedroom apartment and shared living space for faculty and additional classroom space.

"The addition is designed to provide a new school entrance and a signature image for the campus. The primary access drive provides clear orientation to arriving visitors and directs the eye toward a central octagonal pavilion

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and main entry on the lower level of the building," said Lund. "The new structure is cited to create a special courtyard with connection to the upper (balcony) level of the chapel. Within the courtyard, a raised patio at the entry to the chapel entry is designed to serve as an altar space for outdoor religious services. The courtyard also is designed to accommodate a variety of other school gatherings."

Large windows offer natural day-lighting and views of the densely wooded site. Gables add to the ecclesiastical architecture. Buff-colored brick on the building's exterior contrasts with multi-toned local Carderock stone. Stained glass windows and traditional wooden pews add a traditional touch to the chapel sanctuary. And, specifically placed lighting along the perimeter of the chapel enhances the appearance of ceramic medallions depicting the Stations of the Cross.

The school credits the steady work of general contractor Keller Brothers, Inc., that enabled the school to open on time. Only the chapel and third floor were incomplete for the first day of school.

"We did not miss one day of classes due to the construction, despite the fact that there were 460 boys praying for summer not to end," de Vicente joked.

With its new addition, The Heights has been able to maintain its inviting environment, according to de Vicente.

"The Heights has always sought to provide a family-like atmosphere, not an institutional one, for all relationships to flourish," he said. "We did not want to lose that closeness with a larger building."

A close-knit environment is complemented by the personal attention the 70-member all-male faculty pays to each of its students. The new building continues this practice by incorporating faculty offices and small conference rooms with classrooms to facilitate interaction throughout the day between students and teachers.

"Even the Headmaster's office, at his insistence, was designed so that students could easily see him there and walk in for an impromptu visit when passing by on their way to class," Harper said.

*Founded in 1981 by Calvert S. Bowie, AIA, and William C. Gridley, FAIA, Bowie Gridley Architects, [www.bowie-gridley.com](http://www.bowie-gridley.com), focuses on planning and designing outstanding architecture that constantly exceeds client expectations. The firm's six project managers have more than 120 years of combined experience.*

#### **FAST FACTS**

School: The Heights School

Location: Potomac, Maryland

Denomination: Catholic

Student Body: 460 students

Grades Serves: K-12

Project Goal: Expand campus to accommodate growth while maintaining the school's close-knit ambiance and emphasis on relationships

Challenge: The school was located on 20 acres of heavily wooded property. The school leadership wanted to maintain as much of the forest as possible.

Solution: The building was built into the sloped terrain, preserving the land.

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