

Dec 04
Cincinnati magazine

CONTRIBUTORS

New York City-based illustrator **STEVEN SALERNO**, whose whimsical drawings can be seen throughout our Best of the City package, starting on page 136, does hundreds of images each year for magazines, advertising campaigns, and product packaging. Since 2000, he also has created eight picture books for children. "I am gearing more and more of my time towards the children's book marketplace," Salerno says. Two more, *Bedtime!* (Philomel Books) and *Coco the Carrot* (Marshall-Cavendish) will be released next year.

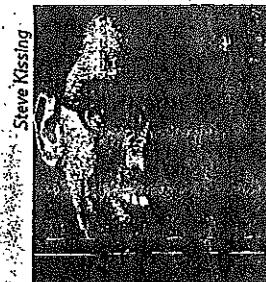
STEVE KISSING, the warped mind behind "Confessions of a Girlie Man" on page 114, earned his share of nicknames in school, including "sissy," "freak," and, given his penchant for perms, "The Fro-Magnon Man." So what lessons does he hope to impart to his two small daughters about guys? "I hope they realize that real men sometimes watch *Lifetime*, and that being a man is about more than swinging a hammer." Kissing is the creative director at HSR Business to Business.

This is the fourth year that *Cincinnati Magazine* photographer **RYAN KURTZ** has photographed winners for the Best of the City issue. "We always need a mix of products, people, places, and food," Kurtz says. This year Kurtz shot more than 30 different Bests. "I try not to think about the amount of work. It's like a game. I keep racking up points every time I finish a shoot."

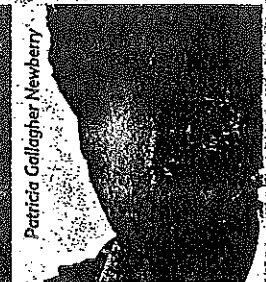
PATRICIA GALLAGHER NEWBERRY, who wrote "Taking Sides," on page 84, teaches journalism at Miami University and writes a biweekly column, "Married With Children," for *The Cincinnati Enquirer*. Managing the media during the Nativity Church crisis was a role reversal for Gallagher. During her days as a business reporter in Cincinnati, Gallagher found that dealing with PR types at Procter & Gamble could be especially frustrating. "Every call had to be processed and approved, every request for an interview with someone outside of PR had to be vetted from on high," she says. "I learned to navigate the PR system there pretty well, but I never liked it."



Steven Salerno



Steve Kissing



Patricia Gallagher Newberry

PATRICIA
GALLAGHER
NEWBERRY

Taking Sides

A former reporter looks back on the crisis at Nativity, one year and many Hail Marys later.

The day the pastor of my parish fired the principal of my kids' school, I knew it was a news story. This was late last year, when the priest scandal was raging across the country. Closer to home, Archbishop Pilarczyk was making headlines of his own, as the Cincinnati Archdiocese was convicted of failing to report abuse of children and set up a \$3 million settlement fund to compensate abuse victims. So when I got the call the Monday before Thanksgiving that the Rev. R. Marc Sherlock, the embattled pastor of Nativity of Our Lord Catholic Church in Pleasant Ridge, had fired our popular school principal, Robert C. Herring—an act that had nothing to do with abuse of children, but everything to do with use of power—I made a couple calls of my own: First to the *Cincinnati Enquirer*, my former full-time home and current freelance employer, and then to WCPO-TV, a station with interest in stories from my neighborhood.

Given the players—a Catholic priest, a longtime principal, and angry parents—I was not surprised when both news organizations sent reporters that first night, as parishioners gathered to learn details of the firing. But I would be awed and a bit astonished at how (and how long) they and their colleagues in the media would remain interested in the firestorm that blew up around the event.

WHEN I ARRIVED for that first meeting, on November 24, I walked directly to the front of the cafeteria. With my communications background and general buttinsky nature, I wanted to put in my two cents on how to run the meeting and tell the parish leaders that I'd already called some reporters. The room soon filled with 200 or more upset parents, eager to vent and ready to respond. Over the next two hours, they did exactly that. With angst, anger, and tearful testimonials, they spoke out against the firing and spoke in favor of Herring. When I got a turn at the mic, I alerted fellow parishioners that reporters were present and anything they said could make a headline.

The die thus cast, I became the *de facto* public relations chief of what would soon become an organized effort to reinstate Bob Herring as principal of the 388-student K-8 school he'd led for 19 years. I was called into service the very next morning, as another 200 mem-

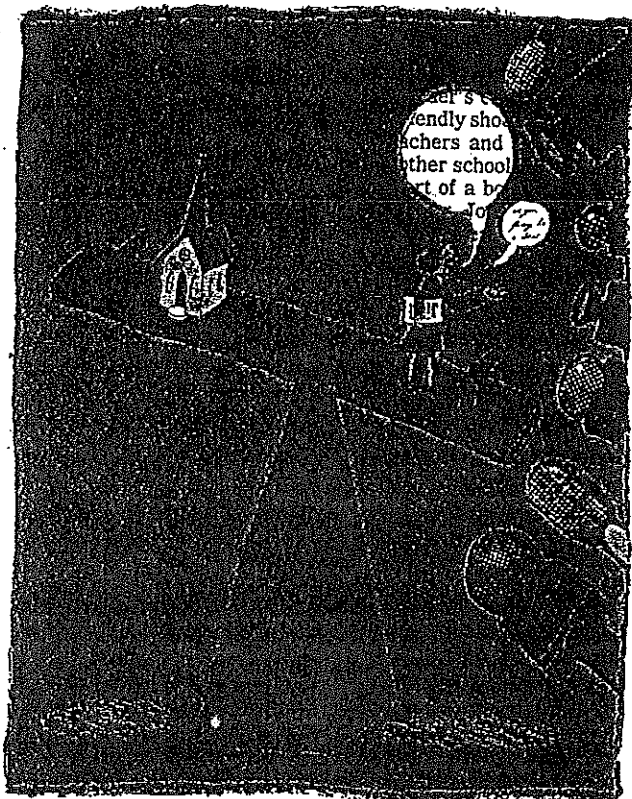


ILLUSTRATION BY DANIEL BAXTER

MEDIA

bers of the parish headed downtown to protest outside the Archdiocese offices. As they gathered at Nativity, I drove to work, calling newsrooms from my car. With the pump primed by the *Enquirer's* story that morning and Channel 9's the night before, I only had to share the outlines of the battle in broad terms. Within days, I could simply call "about the Nativity story" and the journalist on the other end would say "What's new?"

Over my 15 years of newspapering, I'd developed a healthy skepticism of public relations folks. As a business journalist, I appreciated the good ones—the ones who provided access to the real newsmakers (their bosses) and pitched stories with real news value—and I ran from the bad ones, who pushed ideas with little relevance or protected employers with evasive half-truths. Never, even when approached by the mighty Procter & Gamble, did I aspire to join "the other side." So when I put on the hat of PR practitioner for Nativity, it was something of an awkward fit.

The night after Herring's termination, at another packed meeting, someone suggested an expanded attack on the communications front: a Web site. My husband, Doug, the tech brains of our household, had already secured www.keepbobherring.com as a Web address. By Day Three of the Nativity story, he had the shell of the site up and running, creating the second phase of an emerging, albeit on-the-fly, communications strategy. The third and most important ingredient—news to feed the media and fill the Web site—would grow, almost organically, in the days and weeks that followed.

Motivated by a conviction that Herring had been wronged, and mobilized by a belief that Nativity's health is vital to the health of the surrounding community, parishioners went on the offensive. Some planned public events, rallies, marches, prayer services, and the like. Some considered legal options. Others worked on financial matters. Others shared information with area parishes and Nativity's own anxious teachers and staff. Many sent e-mails and letters to church leaders. By mid-December, total attendance at near-daily events related to Herring's dismissal was nearing 3,000.

The media, it seemed, could not get enough of the story. There was daily coverage for the first nine days, and frequent attention after that. All told, local papers and stations ran some 40 stories, including let-

ters to the editor and two editorials. The *National Catholic Reporter* printed three pieces. For parishioners, the Web was the great equalizer: Everyone got the same information at the same time and felt equally engaged. By the time the Web site went dormant in February, its home page and internal links had tallied more than 55,000 hits.

THE MORNING OF December 1 provided plenty of made-for-media moments. Brother Joseph Kamis, the superintendent of Archdiocesan schools, was expected to arrive at Nativity at 7 a.m. to meet with teachers. Some 400 schoolkids and parents arrived a half hour early to line the dark, cold streets of Pleasant Ridge with Herring supporters. Like dozens of other parents, Doug and I roused our three kids long before their usual wake-up time, poured them into coats and hats, and joined the pre-dawn rally. We claimed prime real estate, on the corner of Ridge Avenue and Woodford Road, waving our handmade signs, asking passing cars to "Honk for Herring" or "Beep for Bob." Kamis managed to sneak by undetected, but the kids got a taste of civic involvement that morning. And Nativity got more headlines and airtime.

Just nine days later, the media would turn out in force again, this time for an event where they were *not* welcome. Against advice from all camps, Sherlock called a "listening session" in the church. He issued his rules in advance: Adult parishioners could speak for two minutes. He would listen, but not respond. Media were banned.

Three hundred souls filled the church and faced Sherlock, who sat behind a table at the edge of the altar. The first speaker stepped to the microphone, not 10 feet in front of the pastor, and called for him to reinstate Herring and resign his own position. Over the next 90 minutes, parishioner after parishioner offered variations on that theme. Some were kind in their criticism, others livid in their anger; a few offered support. Sherlock sat silent the entire time, then rose to offer a closing prayer.

That's when I reached a breaking point. Seated in the back of the church, I began yelling "Stop! Stop!" as he plunged through the prayer and the pews began to empty. To me, the listening session was an empty gesture, exceedingly painful for everyone in that holy space, priest and parishioner alike. As I briefed interested media about the

MEDIA

spectacle, I was shaking with rage.

Events moved rapidly after that: An arbitration panel was formed to hear Herring's appeal of his termination, and the panel pushed the parties to consider mediation. On the afternoon of December 15, 2003, a TV reporter called to tell me that Sherlock, after four hours in mediation, announced he would reinstate Herring as principal of Nativity School. Two days later, the media would turn out again, as parishioners filled the Nativity parking lot to welcome Herring back.

DURING THE THREE-WEEK crisis, I had little direct contact with Sherlock. Previously cordial allies for Nativity, we passed in the pews and the parking lot without speaking after Nov. 24. He sent me just one e-mail, directing me not to cover the Herring termination in the parish newsletter that I edit. Later, he called on Doug and I, although not by name, to shut down our "one-sided" Web site. I spoke to him just once after that, offering an awkward thanks for giving my 8-year-old son his First Holy Communion. He did not re-

spond to a request to speak for this article.

But I also had little direct contact with Nativity's principal during the crisis. Bob Herring was ensconced at home for the duration, staying away from mass at the parish he was raised in, staying out of the school that counts him and his two grown children as graduates. The night Herring learned he'd won his job back, I knocked on his front door. He answered immediately, having already greeted a steady stream of well-wishers. We hugged, long and silently. His joy, tinged with relief, was palpable as he smiled and shook his head.

"You know, this isn't about me," he said then, as he has said many times since. "The real story here is about the community and how they care about the school, how they care about the parish, how they care about the neighborhood."

Throughout the furor at Nativity, I was conflicted as the button-pusher of the PR machine. During my time as a reporter and educator (I teach journalism at Miami University), I have been an advocate for full disclosure and transparent decision-making in the media. The journalist, I tell my students,

seeks any and all information. The PR professional seeks to control the flow of information, to flavor or color the news at hand. And so it was at Nativity. The news I issued on behalf of Nativity was true—but it was a truth crafted by a committee of Herring supporters. The pastor's point of view was limited to his statements to parishioners, which we posted on the Web site.

It was disheartening to see how easily—and how uncritically—the media bit. Early in the story, when attention was strongest, neither the priest nor principal, at the advice of attorneys, was talking. Neither were members of the parish who supported the pastor. That left reporters to interview fans of Herring. Vocal, impassioned parishioners, fighting "the church," made for easy-to-understand story lines, good quotes, and great pictures.

Bob Herring was easy to sell, too. Over nearly two decades, he has amassed a long list of accomplishments—and much goodwill—in areas as diverse as technology, international study, religious formation, and the arts. With no one to speak for him, Sherlock, in his third year as pastor, was re-

duced to a stereotype: silent authoritarian, villain in a collar. He fired Herring, news story after news story reported, for "philosophical reasons." That was, in fact, the true nature of the dispute, as each embraced a different understanding of the value of Catholic education and the value of Nativity to the wider community. But it wasn't the whole story.

At least one editor at the *Enquirer* apparently had her fill. One of my students, interning in the newsroom at the time, said the editor balked at more coverage, citing my participation as the cause of excessive media attention. In essence, she told her colleagues that Nativity was getting the ink because I knew who to call and what to say.

The editor was partly right. Yes, the story had news value. And it had resonance, too, as the church nationally and locally grappled with other abuse-of-power issues. Still, I sometimes felt the shill when words I wrote for the Web site or a press release were printed in newspapers or recited on the air, occasionally verbatim. More to the point: I knew many stories lacked suffi-

cient representation of the "other side." Yes, we posted the pastor's statements. Yes, he could have granted interviews. And yes, parishioners who supported him could have spoken up. But I wonder if the outcome of the crisis at Nativity would have been different if they had.

TWO MONTHS AFTER Bob Herring was back on the job, I, like other parishioners, was resuming life outside of crisis mode. In the early evening of Feb. 4, the head of our former steering committee called with stunning—and headline-making—news. Sherlock was leaving Nativity; the Archdiocese had granted him permission to accept a new assignment.

Once word of Sherlock's plans leaked out, the now-disbanded committee gathered around my dining room table that night and crafted a brief, careful statement, offering prayers for our pastor and "regret that efforts to move beyond our strained relationships were not more successful." We shipped it to our "interested media" list at about 10:40 p.m. Most of the TV stations used it at 11. A true PR pro would have

cheered in victory to hear her exact sentences read on the air. Instead, my stomach clenched a bit, knowing we'd issued our version of that momentous decision when our priest still wasn't talking.

Sherlock moved to a parish in Tipp City, Ohio, without fireworks, at the end of June. The Rev. Paul DeLuca, a former associate pastor in the parish, replaced him, joining Nativity from a church in Dayton on July 1. A warm, wise, and kind man—with great skill in running a diverse parish—DeLuca has been welcomed like a lost son and has reinvigorated the parish and its priorities. The pews are fuller on Sundays. The collection basket is heavier, too. Bob Herring, meanwhile, is on the job, as he has been for 20 years, working hard for our kids as always. Of course, that's just my opinion—parent, parishioner, and known advocate.

As for my stint on the other side of the notebook, will I ever play PR pro again? Under the same circumstances, yes, but more warily. Would I earn my daily bread doing PR work? No. The Nativity battle was personal. God willing, the need won't arise again. ©