

# McGrath: Remembering back to that Easter week that could have changed lives if not for one heroic act



Mike Messerich, retired police chief of South St. Paul, Minnesota, stands at Mayslake in Oak Brook, where he once rescued a drowning classmate 60 years ago while attending St. Joseph's Franciscan Seminary in Westmont. (David McGrath/Naperville Sun)

By [DAVID MCGRATH](#)

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Our bond was alphabetical: Miller, Messerich, McGrath.

As high school sophomores at St. Joseph's Franciscan Seminary in Westmont, we lined up together in class, sat in the same church pew and at the same cafeteria table, and slept in the same row of dormitory bunks.

The lone exception was Frank Oberle, a Cleveland resident who, in spite of being further down the alphabet, shared our love of hockey, Simon and Garfunkel, and Lucky Strike cigarettes.

Fred Miller came from Neopit, Wisconsin, where he had been persuaded by his pastor to pursue the priesthood. Hulking and athletic, Fred was a full-blooded Menomonee with a lively wit.

Mike Messerich, from Minnesota, was thoughtful but not outspoken, offering his judgment only when asked. His was a family of hunters and anglers, and he had a crew cut and freckles.

I was flattered that they thought of me as a "greaser" and gangster because I was born in Chicago, my Sunday shoes pointy black leather with Cuban heels. I did nothing to persuade them otherwise since it seemed preferable to my real identity as the quasi-nerd middle child in a family of 10.

The week before Easter in our Tuesday night study hall, Oberle crossed the aisle with an open book so as not to arouse the attention of the friar on duty.

"It's supposed to be 80 degrees tomorrow," he said.

As we had conspired to swim in one of the campus lakes in violation of school rules, I asked Fred if he was up for it.

"Maybe," Fred said. "Lessin' there's a trap, like a Franciscan hiding underwater, breathing through a cattail reed."

"Ain't that an Indian thing?" Frank asked.

"Nah. You watch too many John Wayne movies."

"What about you, Mike?" I said.

Messerich didn't immediately answer. He had a whetstone with which he had been sharpening a knife pilfered from the refectory. He raised it above his head and released it, letting it plunge into his desktop.

"When do we swim?" he responded.

St. Joe's sat on several hundred acres of what used to be the Peabody estate in Oak Brook, stretching south from 31st Street to 35th Street and east from Midwest Road to Ogden Avenue.

The closed campus rule was meant to keep us isolated from the secular world. But we still had room to roam through multiple sports fields and the trail around two lakes. A third body of water, Mayslake, was where St. Paschal's monastery housed the Franciscan brothers and was strictly out of bounds. We glimpsed it from afar, its beauty sparkling and inviting compared to the muddy ponds where we were allowed.

On Wednesday, we managed to hike to Mayslake unnoticed. The water was freezing so Frank and I plopped on the grassy bank and lit up a contraband Lucky.

"Chicken\*\*\*\* bastards," said Fred, pronouncing it "bos-turds" with his up-north twang.

We watched him strip off his clothes and wade in. He was up to his chest by the time Mike caught up, the two of them splashing each other till Fred muscled him down into the water.

Mike surfaced and swam out. He went 20 yards before he turned, swimming back in a wide arc around Fred.

Fred shot us a glance before plunging under. He bobbed up and spun around like a trick bear, the back of his head and inky black hair all we could see.

On land, Mike was drying himself off with his shirt when he abruptly looked up. Fred was saying something, but not very loudly. We hushed to hear a barely audible "help."

"He's screwing with us," I said, taking a drag off my Lucky.

But Mike Messerich charged back into the water. He dove in and with swift, smooth strokes was instantly there, their faces inches apart. He wrangled Fred into a headlock and commenced a kind of sidestroke to tow him to shore.

We watched, mesmerized, till they touched bottom, disentangled and got to their feet.

Frank asked Fred if he was OK.

He was now, he said. He had had a cramp all up his left side, and Mike saved his life.

Mike protested. Anybody would have done the same, he said, and it was lucky he had taken Red Cross training.

As they dressed, no one said a word.

Finally, Frank broke the silence. He offered that there'd be less chance of being caught if we cut across Pine Hill.

"Don't be expecting the Indian scout to guide you through the woods," Fred said.

Frank leapt from behind to steal his cap, and Fred stuck out a leg to send him sprawling.

By the end of senior year, we had all left the seminary. Mike, fittingly, became a first responder and the police chief of South St. Paul, Minnesota. Fred would go on to be elected tribal sheriff.

Sadly, Frank's life was cut short in a motorcycle accident on a Nebraska highway.

On April 16, I hope to see Mike and Fred at St. Joe's reunion at the Embassy Suites in Oakbrook Terrace.

We'll reminisce, and I'll say how they helped me learn about life, fraternity and responsibility.