

are made, they understand a little bit about how I think.”

And it isn't only the students who benefit; Mr. Easler said of his time spent in the classroom, “It's my favorite part of the day. I could be having the worst day, but then I go up there for 40 minutes, and I feel like I float down the hill afterwards.”

While Mr. Casey was the inspiration for Mr. Easler's return to the classroom, former Head of School Walter “Gray” Mattern Jr. (Headmaster, 1955–1971) and his wife, Virginia “Ginny” K. Mattern, paved the way for another recently revived tradition that allows Mr. Easler to interact with students in a meaningful manner.

“As long as I've been at this school, the name Mattern has been prominent in conversations with alumni from those decades, so when I

▼ Head of School Brian Easler shares a light moment with smiling members of the WMA Softball team in 2014.

became Head and I had an opportunity to meet Mrs. Mattern,” Mr. Easler said. “I asked her how she and her husband had developed that kind of relationship with their students, and she said, very simply and eloquently, ‘We let them into our lives and let them know that we were interested in theirs.’”

It was this conversation that inspired Mr. Easler to begin hosting members of the senior class at his own home for dinner and conversation in the spring of 2016. With the help of Bill Wells, advisor to the WMA Class of 2016, Mr. Easler organized a plan that ensured every member of the graduating class, 12 at a time, would have the opportunity to join him and his wife, Stephanie, at their home for a very special meal before becoming alumni.

During these dinners, which are expertly prepared by the school's dining hall staff, Mr. Easler asks open-ended questions about students' experiences, seeking to understand what the

“I get to see between 12 and 15 seniors every day and talk about ethics and values, and that permeates” — BRIAN EASLER

school does well and what it might do to improve. Impressed with the quality of the feedback, Mr. Easler passed along the students' logistical suggestions to the administrative team. This helped the school to improve multiple student-centered programs, like sit-down lunch, and dining hall and gym hours.

The program was such a success, in fact, that this year, while the Easlars still hosted 12 seniors every week during the spring, they expanded the program by hosting new students every week,



► Head of School Brian Easler blends in well with Chris Kalil '17 and Natalie Kelley '17 during Color Run 2017.

all year, beginning with the oldest and newest students first.

“Once a week, all year, we had 12 kids over

for dinner. By the time we got to the spring, we had hosted every new student. This way, ideally, in a four-year cycle, by the time they graduate, (students) would have been to the Head’s house twice, once at the beginning of their WMA careers, and once again at the end,” Mr. Easler said, thereby ensuring the students feel a full-circle connection with him, while at the same time allowing them to provide meaningful feedback about their experiences at two integral junctures. “The feedback I get from those dinners, I feed directly back to the admin team. They come up with a lot of good ideas.”

While Mr. Easler’s return to the classroom and student dinners may be modernized tributes to previous traditions, what he lovingly calls his “sporadic surprises” have become a new tradition all his own.

Whether visiting the Rich Hall dorms while wearing his hot chocolate-dispensing backpack, donning the Titan mascot costume in secret, filming his own version of carpool karaoke or charging full speed into the Color Run and down the senior slip ’n slide in a suit, tie and patent leather shoes, Mr. Easler’s moments of whimsy and humor never fail to elicit shrieks of joyous surprise, deafening applause and



generally unparalleled excitement from the students.

But lest you think this is the one situation in which Mr. Easler doesn’t have a deeper purpose, he assured us that he does; he hopes to send a meaningful message, even when covered from head-to-toe in dyed cornstarch—especially then, in fact.

“Kids will do what we do, not what we say,

and it’s about demonstrating to the students a willingness to take risks, because the disciplinary, orderly, structured role, that’s very natural for me,” Mr. Easler said. “It’s just who I am, and the kids know that. The Color Run, carpool karaoke, these things are well outside of my personal comfort zone, but that’s why it’s particularly meaningful to them. They see me doing something that isn’t particularly comfortable for me, and it makes it OK for them do things that may not be particularly comfortable for them. Interacting with them in a non-disciplined, non-structured way is very important to me, and I want to show them that.”

And therein lies Mr. Easler’s balanced and sincere approach to interacting with WMA’s students. That respect that inspires the young men and women who cross his path to straighten up and say hello is not fostered by seriousness and discipline alone, but by the intentional combination of strong leadership, genuine caring and a dash of humor.

It is easier for students to respect, value and listen to a person whom they know respects, values and hears them in return, and Mr. Easler invests

◀ Brian and Dr. Stephanie Easler host student dinners at the Head of School’s house.

the time and effort necessary to demonstrate that he is, without doubt, just such a person. ■

