

ST. EDWARD
PRIDE

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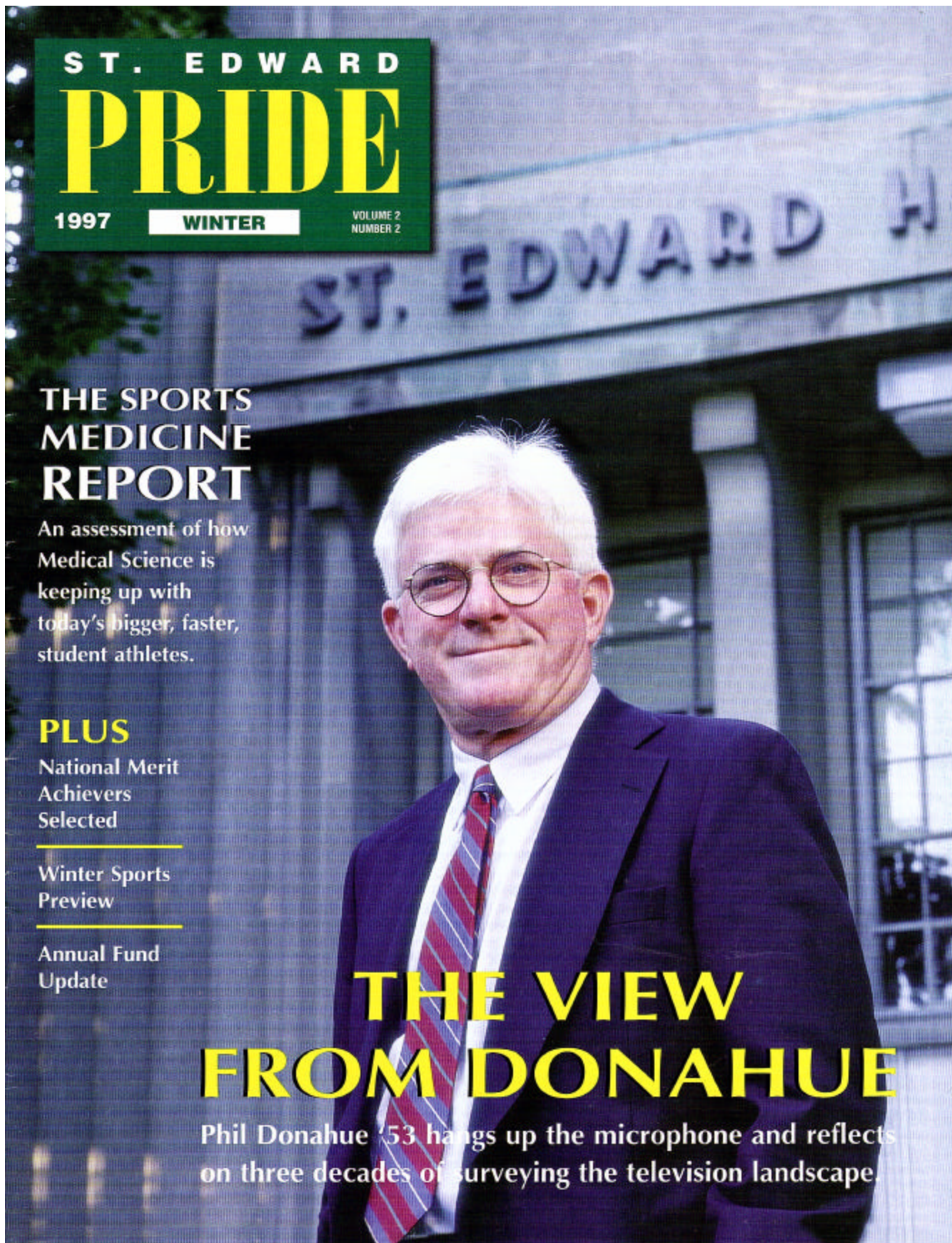
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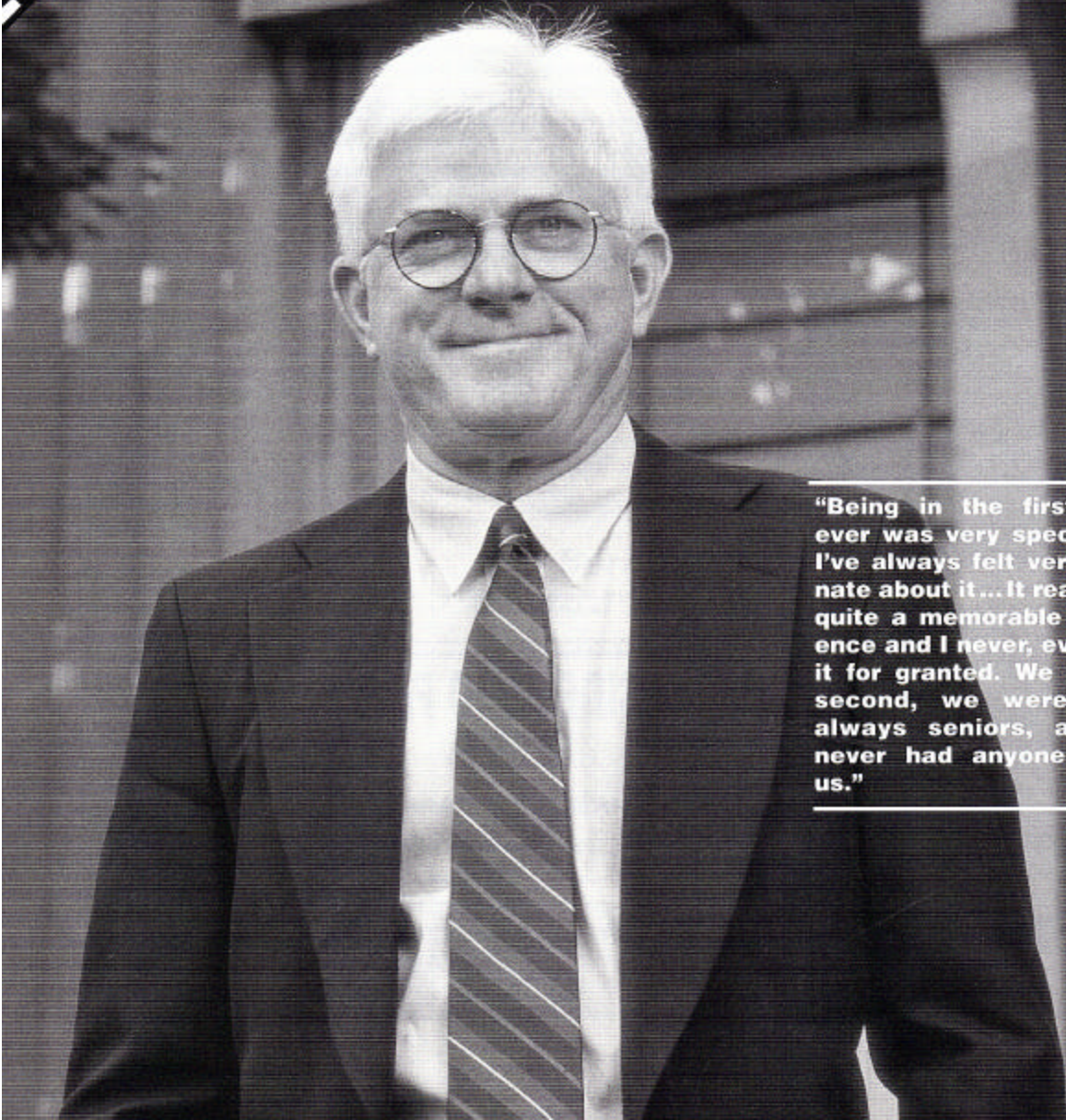
**THE VIEW
FROM DONAHUE**

Phil Donahue '53 hangs up the microphone and reflects
on three decades of surveying the television landscape.



*St. Edward
Alumni Profile*

ST. EDWARD



“Being in the first class ever was very special and I’ve always felt very fortunate about it...It really was quite a memorable experience and I never, ever take it for granted. We weren’t second, we were first--always seniors, and we never had anyone above us.”

The Kid From West Park Signing Off

by Matt Weiland

After nearly three decades as America's premiere daytime television host, Phil Donahue hangs up the mike and considers where he's been, what he's done and the impact of television on our lives.

For nearly three decades, Phil Donahue ('53) was a daily fixture on television and in homes across the nation. His daytime talk show — first introduced in Dayton, Ohio in 1967 — quickly incorporated the radical notion of including audience questions in the mix of inquiry and inquisition (radical since the majority of audience members were women). Over the course of the next 29 years, Donahue and his show were the recipients of 20 Daytime Emmy Awards (including nine for Outstanding Host), a Peabody Award, and, in 1993, Donahue himself was inducted into the Academy of Television Arts & Sciences Hall of Fame. And always, Donahue took the microphone or the podium with a sense of grace, a sense of poise, and a wry, self-deprecating wit.

Yet, after 7,000 one-hour daily shows, after numerous critically-acclaimed prime-time specials on PBS and NBC, it was a spontaneous display of appreciation and affection that rendered Phil Donahue speechless on a warm and sunny evening in September.

Having come full circle, returning home to St. Edward High School with wife Marlo Thomas by his side and receiving the St. Edward St. Joseph's Benefactor Award, Phil Donahue spent the evening reminiscing with fellow alumni and their wives and

recalling his days as a member of the first St. Edward freshman class in 1949.

Then, as he graciously stood on the stage of the gymnasium for a second photo shoot, chatting about politics and presidential debates and the exclusion of Ross Perot and Ralph Nader, a group of about 40 young men and women, band and theater students, entered the gym with the usual clamor common among spirited sophomores, juniors and seniors. When they saw that something was taking place, however, and as they gradually recognized the silver-haired, silver-tongued subject of the photo shoot, a respectful hush descended and the students took seats in the bleachers.

Nevertheless, as the shoot finished and as Donahue walked down the steps of the stage, there gradually arose the spontaneous sound of applause rippling through the group of youngsters, a genuine, heartfelt ovation for the man who had begun his show when these students were still twinkling in their parents' eyes. "We love you Phil!" someone shouted. And the man who once interviewed John Kennedy and Malcolm X, who has held discourse with South African president Nelson Mandela and former wife Winnie, former Sandinista leader and Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega and Israel's Ariel Sharon, this man who has held court with some of the world's great figures, seemed sincerely touched by the impromptu gesture. And, offering a blushing smile and an appreciative wave, Donahue appeared at a rare and genuine loss for words.

For indeed it has been his ability at being a deft conversationalist that has set Donahue apart and has become his stitch in the American media fabric. He

seems at ease in all venues, appears comfortable with all guests, all audiences. Perhaps it is the Cleveland West Side Irish strain of charm. Perhaps it is simply good upbringing, the sincerity of the empathy, the flexibility of seeing more than one side to a debate, or even the relish of the debate itself or the reward in a story well-told. Whatever the blend of ingredients, Donahue's has been a recipe for success that has in many ways distinguished him as an American original recognized worldwide.

According to Donahue, however, what may distinguish him most — or at the very least, the thing that set the tone for achievements to come — was and is his status as a charter member of the first class to enroll at a new Brothers of the Holy Cross high school called St. Edward in Lakewood, Ohio. It is a membership he truly cherishes and one that he points to with warmth and pride.

"Being in the first class ever was very special and I've always felt very fortunate about it," he says. "And I think the longer we are away from the experience, the more we appreciate how really special it was. I'd never been to high school before and being the very first class in many ways made us pioneers in the literal sense. Plus, we were always 'seniors.'"

Donahue points to the monumental nature of the endeavor involved in starting the school, noting the efforts of the founders, Principal Br. John William Donoghue, Br. Paul Schwoyer and Br. Regis Gendron.

"What strikes me is the immense undertaking by these three Holy Cross Brothers," he reflects. "Imagine, three brothers, three adult males, educating a 110 thirteen- and fourteen-year-old boys. Put that on a piece



of paper and look at it and you begin to appreciate what a challenge this was. They had to monitor the ground-breaking for the new building; oversee the architecture; continue to provide curriculum for these new students; found an athletic program, a music program, a social program; arrange for language, science, and religion curriculum; and do what they could to improve the social skills of these raw recruits coming out of west Cleveland — which they did by hiring a married couple to teach us how to dance. It really was quite a memorable experience and I never, ever take it for granted. We weren't second, we were first — always seniors, and we never had anyone above us.

"Classes were held in St. Theresa's Academy at Robinwood and Detroit — French was held in the upstairs front bedroom while algebra was taught in the basement fruit cellar," he recalls. [The current building was opened, though not completed, by his junior year.] "I'd never drawn before, but I became a cartoonist for the school newspaper. I'd never been in a band before — most of us had never picked up a musical instrument before and had no musical background whatsoever. But, by

God, we formed a band and we held a concert in December and they loved us. We got a standing ovation. Of course, I don't think you'd be able to sell the recording today, but it really was quite special."

When talking to Phil Donahue, however, there is an inclination, if not



outright desire, to talk about what his thoughts are on talk television, the format he spawned and which has been spurned by pundits and lamented by critics across the land for its air-it-all-out nature at the expense of good taste and decorum.

"I share the national lament at the

absence of more thoughtful material on the daytime schedule," he says, "but I'm also a big boy and I know how this system works. As long as this game is played by determining winners by the size of audience, then the system is working. What you're seeing on daytime television are programs that have found their audience.

"I think it is important for us to take a look at this, because I think it is a reflection of our culture," he continues. "We do not care about international issues, except when we have things that go boom, like bombings or shootings. Otherwise, we have encouraged our young people not to really have a lot of interest in things beyond our shores."

He also believes that this limited scope of striving for enlightenment is not simply a problem afflicting television, but one which has become a concern throughout mass media and popular culture in America today.

"Those people who would be upset about what they see on daytime television might also take a look at *Time* and *Newsweek*," he says. "It used to be that the covers were all major stories; now they're all major movies. Bette Midler, Kevin



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Costner. *Time* and *Newsweek* look like *People* magazine. So the same thing that's happened to daytime television has happened to print. The difference is, print can kind of posture. Print stomps around saying, 'Ain't it awful?!' You see *Newsweek* putting Geraldo on the cover with his broken nose with the article inside saying, "Isn't this awful?" All the while, *Newsweek* knows that this is going to sell magazines. And I can't blame the editors of *Newsweek*. After all, what good is it to write if nobody's reading? And all the good, hardworking people whose jobs depend on the survival of *Newsweek* are going to vote to put Geraldo on the cover. We have to understand this. It's not enough just to huff-n-puff.

"Even in cable, you've got to take another look," he cautions. "These many, many cable channels that broadcasters are always bragging about are owned by very few companies. And if you look at a lot of cable channels, you see a lot of cheap jewelry and Jesus for sale. You're getting C-Span, but you're not getting C-Span II on many cable systems. So as wonderful as that is — and I think it is, I admire Brian Lamb and I'm a fan of C-Span — the fact is that C-Span could get crowded out. Money is always speaking. As Bob Dylan said, 'Money doesn't talk, it screams obscenities.' Money can blow away programs that you and I believe are important.

"When I went to St. Edward and we had civics classes," he recalls, "I tried to stay awake with the movement of the bill from the House to the Senate to the conference back to the House for reconciliation — I mean, just staying awake was a challenge. Today's Phil Donahue at St. Edward gets C-Span. He sees the person in the well. He sees the arguments on the floor. If he's lucky, he's got C-Span II that gives him the Senate. I think it's a magnificent thing that will, I hope, inspire more young people, including St. Edward graduates, to seek a life of public service. I just think that C-Span is a trigger to public service that can really help this country in a big way. But many cable systems already pre-empt a

good portion of programming on C-Span II for half-hour infomercials. And that's the danger."

Then what exactly are some of the more recent examples of enlightening television?

"I think 'Frontline' does a lot of good work. And it's hard to imagine a more important program than 'Nightline,'" he notes. "I do think, however, that mainstream media today is far too tentative, that it pretty much unconsciously follows a white-male, boardroom, Republican/Conservative oversight. There's no Left left. Ralph Nader chose his vice-presidential running mate and the only people that covered it was the Associated Press. Media will write about something then if they see

that none of their readers give a damn, they move on. Most major newspapers, even those with bureaus in Washington, do not regularly cover the regulatory agencies. Of course, there are some wonderful examples of people who go it alone, go against the grain, stick a nose under the tent, but they're largely marginalized."

"We're very proud of the shows that we've done over the past 30 years in which we've kicked some very big tires... When you think about it, what we've done and how far we've come as a nation, the dialogue that has surfaced, it can be pretty amazing."

cized cigarettes long before this past election. We criticized the automobile industry. We criticized doctors — we had to do a show on 'Doctors Who Hate Donahue.' This was because we had featured people a long time ago who said there was too much surgery, too much patronizing, too much patting women on the head and telling them to go the drugstore, the failure of answering legitimate questions.

"I think that overall we have been a positive force for women," he notes with pride. "Many places I go, women come up to me and say that because of a show we did they got out of an abusive relationship. We've seen an awful lot of pain on our show, as well. We've lost children to leukemia, sickle-cell anemia, AIDS, and various blood diseases. But in the process, we've educated a lot of people about these illnesses as well as about the people who contract them. I'm very proud of the friend-

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alumni profile

ships I have forged with Ralph Nader and Gloria Steinem, both of whom I met through the show. I still am inspired by the presence of Linus Pauling, who'd won two Nobel Prizes when he visited our show. All in all, we had a pretty good run."

For the time being, though, he's quit running, retiring from his show this past year, taking a break from the day-to-day so as to assess what his next project will be, what is beyond the next horizon. But thus far, the kid from West Park has plenty to smile about, a good deal to be proud of, and, as he indicates, a lot to be thankful for.

"I'm a very lucky guy," he says. "I was raised on Southland Avenue between Munn Road and Rocky River Drive. The fathers got off the bus at five-thirty, six-o'clock. Their children ran to them as they walked home from work. Our Lady of Angels (OLA) was the center of my educational and social life. I had a baseball uniform and played baseball for OLA. I went to dances at OLA. I went to church during Perpetual Adoration at 3 o'clock in the morning at OLA. I cleaned the windows for the nuns during the summer at St. Joseph's Academy. I served Benediction at the Poor Claire's. Seven-thirty on a Wednesday night during the winter, it's dark, candles flickering, and we'd have 20 or 30 faithful gathered in those pews, most of them women. I played stick ball in the street. My mother never missed preparing a meal. I always had a clean baseball uniform. You know, as warm as you'd get would be dancing close at the St. Christopher Canteen. In high school, the big thing was whether she'd kiss you good night.

"Then, of course, I brought all of those Catholic, middle-class values with me to Notre Dame. Somebody told me the other day that 15 of us, (Class of 1953) went on to school in South Bend, and I think we all graduated from there. We've got doctors. We've got an ex-FBI agent. We did all right. I probably haven't done enough to thank the good men who devoted their lives to their own vocation and teaching us, but I am certainly grateful for the good foundation they provided for me." 

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