By Becca Shaw
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For BC Students, Father Neenan is a Go-To Man

While dining hall buzz invites students to share stories and experiences, Father William Neenan, S.J.,Chan, makes his way through the maze of tables toward an empty seat. "Hello, friends. Would you mind if I join you for lunch?"

Clad in a dark blazer and tie, the Jesuit situates himself at the table, breaks apart an oversized cookie into several chunks, and says, "Let me tell you a little bit about myself" while offering cookie pieces around the table.

But Father Neenan offers more than just cookies. The usual lunch conversations revolve around classes and studies and lack of sleep are replaced with talk of home, friends, and what it really means to be a sports fan. Students leave lunch with a different sense of being familiar, bearing many "Neenanian philosophies" on life.

This gregarious priest is a well-known figure among BC students. Born and raised in Sioux City, Iowa, he attended St. Louis University, the second-oldest Jesuit university in the United States. "I went there for pre-law, met some Jesuits, and ended up becoming a Jesuit," he said.

He has had a distinguished academic career, teaching for 14 years at the University of Michigan before being invited to be the first Gasson Professor in Economics at BC in 1979. He was appointed dean of the university's College of Arts and Sciences in 1980, a position he held for six years, then served as vice president for 11 years, and is now

vice president and special assistant to the president at the Heights.

Coming from a family interested in social questions and political issues, Neenan chose the Jesuit path because of his interest in social justice. "I like ideas, intellectual life, and university life," he said. "The community aspect attracted me, and I wanted to do what God wanted me to do."

He traces his family roots back to Ireland and the years of the Great Famine; in 1852, three Neenan brothers left their native town of Doneraile, Co. Cork, and landed in Virginia Beach. A few years later they headed west, settling in Keokuk, Iowa. On a trip to Ireland in the early 1980s, Father Neenan paid a visit to his relatives in Doneraile where he found the baptismal record of his great-grandfather from 1826.

He visited two families of relatives during his visit, and said he felt at home when he took a trip to the Neenan farm. "I knew I was at home because the Neenan sheep resembled Uncle Frank," he said with a laugh.

Neenan uses his sharp wit and his Midwestern roots to connect with students on campus. In 1981, he started up a luncheon club for students from different geographical backgrounds with the "original and the elite" being the Iowa/Nebraska luncheon club. "I found many people on the East Coast are challenged in a language way, and to be with people from the Midwest who speak English accurately is comforting," he says with a Neenanian smile. The purpose of the club is twofold, he said: "For people from the area to get to know each other better, and to make fun of everyone else."

Over time, 15 such luncheon clubs, with students from all over the country, have emerged to meet once a semester, sporting names like the McKee-DakSoDak and Peach clubs.

Nick Deming, a senior and a member of the NorCal luncheon group, first met Neenan as a freshman. "The luncheons are amusing because Father Neenan isn't from California, but he tries hard to make us feel very comfortable. There are many students from my high school and our main rival back home, so it's fun every time we get together because the rivalry is rekindled; Father Neenan likes to egg it on a bit and get everyone laughing. He does a great job of bringing the group together."

"Aside from being genuinely interested in the lives of students here, he's also a genius," said Ryan Heffernan, a recent BC graduate. "Father Neenan has read more books in a year than I have in a lifetime. So he's always good for a random fact or for an answer to a hard-to-solve question."

Neenan is widely known on campus because of his annual "Dean's List of Recommended Reading," comprising novels, biographies, histories, and books he considers a good read. The idea of the list came to him when he was Dean of A&S and was looking for a way to get the attention of incoming freshmen.

This accomplished man and priest and teacher also serves as the adviser to the a cappella group "The Acoustics" and celebrates Mass on Sundays in St. Joseph's Chapel on Upper Campus. He also stays a part of students' lives once they leave BC, "I officiate at about seven to eight BC weddings a year," he says. "It's a great honor to be invited."

Over the past 25 years, he has officiated at more than 150 weddings of BC alums.

When asked about his hopes for the future, Neenan is back in his chair, hands clasped and in deep thought. "I hope BC will do well in the ACC, and I also hope I will continue to be welcomed by students and continue to enjoy my role as a grandfather to students."

Becca Shaw is a member of the class of 2007 at Boston College.