

DOUGHERTY FAMILY COLLEGE

Newsletter



DEAN'S CORNER

We started the school year with sad and heavy hearts because our beloved friend and co-founding benefactor, Mr. Mike Dougherty, passed away during the summer. Nine years ago, former president Dr. Julie Sullivan had a vision to start a two-year college at the University of St. Thomas. Dr. Sullivan asked her good friends, Mike and Kathy Dougherty, to be the college's founding benefactors. Mike, Kathy, Sarah, and Mollie (their daughters) have been committed to the success of DFC's scholars, alumni, staff, and faculty.

The Dougherty family has adopted us into their family, and we will always be grateful to them. Mike lived his faith through his words and actions. Mike believed in second chances and promoted excellence. At Dougherty Family College, we are dedicated to narrowing the opportunity gap in our higher education system and promoting excellence.

At Dougherty Family College, we will continue to work diligently to ensure that scholars who are Pell-eligible and the first in their families to attend college are equipped with the knowledge, skills, and information they need to thrive in college and in their future careers. We are preparing transformational leaders who will change the trajectory of their families, communities, state, and nation.

Mike was a man of great integrity, and he advocated hard for our scholars. Mike and Kathy welcomed every new class during our Summer Enrichment Program, and they celebrated with scholars each year at graduation. They valued and loved our scholars and alumni. I don't have adequate words that can fully express how much I will miss Mike. He was much more than a founding benefactor; he was a true and loving friend. In honor of my dear friend's memory, I plan to work hard to ensure that DFC is strong and sustainable for generations to come.

I strongly believe that Mike would be very happy that we have graduated 453 scholars with associate degrees and 168 with bachelor's degrees. The legacy of the Dougherty family and all partners of Dougherty Family College will live on forever through the lives of DFC alumni and their children's children.

This newsletter is dedicated to the loving memory of a remarkable human being, Mr. Mike Dougherty.

Much Gratitude & Love,

Buffy Smith

Buffy Smith, Ph.D.
Dean and Frey Endowed Chair
Dougherty Family College



Remembering Mr. Mike Dougherty

"Mike Dougherty lived his life with intense determination, keen business savvy, a colossal sense of humor, but most of all an infinite benevolent spirit. It is that very nature that has impacted so many people throughout Mike's lifetime and beyond...the employees who were unable to work, but were kept on the payroll, building a hospice center in memory of a beloved brother, funding research for prostate cancer, helping countless individuals connect to a medical professional and of course making Dougherty Family College a reality. Mike is greatly missed, but his mission lives on."

(Sheila Juran, Chair, DFC Advisory Board)

"My favorite memory of Mike Dougherty is from the DFC Graduation ceremony in 2025. I remember looking over at him as the graduates walked across the stage. He had a permanent smile (like a proud parent) as each name was read. You could tell it gave him great joy."

(Brad von Bank, Vice-Chair, DFC Advisory Board)

"My favorite memory is when we were out at dinner, and several people recognized Mike. He seemed so busy and larger than life, yet when it came time to order, he knew every one of Kathy's favorite dishes—her favorite colors on the plates, sides, desserts, drinks—everything! He correctly predicted her entire order before she was asked, then looked at me with a grin when she ordered exactly that."

For your average husband, that would be a brain exercise; for Mike, it was just a Tuesday night (literally September 20, 2022). He was always miles ahead with his thoughts and generosity, and that's what made him so successful to us.

Love, now and forever—your friends, Mesum and Mortaza"

(Mesum Haider and Mortaza Ahmady, DFC Class of 2019)



Remembering Mr. Mike Dougherty

“My favorite memories of Mr. Mike Dougherty are when he greeted our inaugural class and his presence at the inaugural graduation ceremony.”

(Zahir El-Amin, DFC Class of 2019)

“My favorite memory with Mr. Dougherty was when he came into the campus store and jokingly said I shorted him 15 cents at checkout.”

(Julian Lockhart, DFC class of 2021)

"My favorite memory of Mike was the day we opened our doors and welcomed our first class. His presence that day, and the way he and Kathy connected with the scholars, reflected his deep commitment and genuine care for each one of them. In that moment, I realized that by joining the DFC team, I was becoming part of something truly special and impactful. Mike's love for this school and our scholars has never faded, and his legacy of compassion and dedication continues to inspire us all."

(Amy Kadrmas, DFC Professional Internship Program Director)

“What stands out as a really unique moment was after Mike's first speech to our first class. It must have been during summer orientation in 2017. He shared powerfully around some of his struggles, including a learning disability and being orphaned and having to make his own way.

After, one of the freshmen and I were chatting and he said something along the lines of, ‘A lot of people who've never had to deal with anything big tell me, 'You can do it!' and I never believed it or was inspired to try until now.’

Wow. That student graduated from DFC and attained a BA.”

(Sarah McCann, DFC Associate Dean of Academics)



Remembering Mr. Mike Dougherty

"My favorite memory with Mr. Dougherty was having the opportunity to meet him and his wife Mrs. Kathy Dougherty at the 2024 DFC graduation. I was able to thank them for their generosity and the tremendous opportunity to pursue my degree at the University of St. Thomas."

(Wyatt Jellison, DFC Class of 2024)

"It is truly because of Mr. Dougherty and his family's work that have made us able to achieve our ancestors' wildest dreams and continue to soar higher! This is telling of Mr. Dougherty's character and the belief he had in the future of our nation and for the common good, by pouring resources into an intentional effort."

(Kayla Martin, DFC Class of 2023)

"In every interaction I had with Mike, I was greeted with a fist bump and two questions: 1) How are you doing? 2) How are the scholars doing? He would occasionally tease about one thing or another. Ultimately, I knew that he really cared about the scholars and the team that we have in place to serve them."

(Brad Pulles, DFC Associate Dean of Students)



Empowerment: Shame Resiliency Model

Empowerment: Developing a Shame Resilience Model in Higher Education

2025 Innovation Fellows Sarah McCann, Angela Mendez-Vanegas, and Brad Pulles share updates on developing a model for shame resilience at Dougherty Family College (DFC).

The following sentiment was shared by every suspended Dougherty Family College student in June 2024: “I knew I needed help, but I was too ashamed to talk to my teachers about it.”

Although shame is just one factor that can affect retention, the above refrain is still agonizing to hear at a college that prides itself on having faculty and staff who work hard to foster student belonging and provide access to wraparound supports.

In response, we crafted an ambitious goal for the 2024-2025 school year: As a college community, we will work to address students’ feelings of shame and increase the support they seek and receive.

However, we soon hit a roadblock. Most research on shame in higher education problematizes the students and offers one-way interventions designed to get them to change. That framework is troubling for us because it ignores the reciprocal nature of education, and it assumes faculty and staff are - at worst - neutral in the environments that we create. We know that we need to grow, too. For us, any shame-mitigation efforts must also help faculty and staff understand, recognize, and respond to shame effectively in order to better examine how our interactions with students can either increase or decrease their support-seeking behaviors.

We could not find such a program for higher education, so we sought an innovation grant to design one.



Left to right: Sarah McCann (Associate Dean of Academics, Dougherty Family College), Angela Mendez-Vanegas (Life Skills Coach and Counselor, Dougherty Family College), Brad Pulles (Associate Dean of Students, Dougherty Family College)

Empowerment: Shame Resiliency Model

During the spring of 2025, Faculty & Staff Innovation Fellows grant recipients - DFC Counselor Angela Mendez-Vanegas and Associate Deans Sarah McCann and Brad Pulles - solicited experts in education, social work, and human development from across the university to ideate on what a shame resilience program for staff, faculty, and students could comprise. Over a series of convenings we broadly discerned it should focus on staff and faculty first, to help us confront shame-inducing triggers and learn some practical, culturally responsive ways to navigate them in student-facing interactions.

A Shame Resilience Curriculum

We found many of our objectives aligned with the work of Brené Brown, whose shame resilience curriculum provided a starting point for faculty and staff conversations and reflections; we wanted to encourage discussions around navigating shame and fostering deeper empathy and connection with students. We pivoted our innovation goal: Implement Brown's shame curriculum with all DFC faculty and staff and infuse it with robust surveying, submitted reflections, and new and tailored group exercises developed in real-time and based on faculty/staff feedback to help us reduce the effects of shame in student-facing spaces and to deepen the knowledge base on shame research and programming designed for higher education professionals. We will work through and develop the curriculum as a staff and faculty community during the 2025-2026 academic year and will engage students in 2026-2027.

Over the summer of 2025, all DFC faculty and staff read Brown's seminal book on shame, *I Thought It Was Just Me (But It Isn't): Making the Journey from "What Will People Think?" to "I Am Enough"*. We surveyed DFC staff and faculty on their understanding of shame, what shame "feels like," and if and how shame shows up in their interactions with others, as well as whether (and why) they think a shame resilience program for "adults in the building" could be useful. High engagement and response rates helped us develop our opening, five-hour session merging Brown's curriculum with culturally sustaining, DFC-infused examples, concerns, and suggestions. We had extensive conversation that offered an opportunity to share deeply. Participants also offered vulnerable (and anonymous) reflections in our pre- and post-class surveys.



Empowerment: Shame Resiliency Model

We have established a shame resilience Canvas course for DFC staff and faculty to work through the curriculum, as well as participate in surveys and reflections that will shape additional group debriefing time. The innovation team will continue to harvest data from surveys and submitted assignments, collaboratively analyzing and incorporating insights into programmatic exercises and reflection opportunities for personal and collective growth.

It has been a strong start. And while there will always be some students who leave us, we hope that - with attention to both shame and empathy - they no longer cite shame as a driving factor in their departure.

The Power of Internships

Since 2021, the Minneapolis Downtown Improvement District (Mpls DID) has been a dedicated partner of the Dougherty Family College Professional Internship Program. Each year, Mpls DID welcomes a new DFC intern to join its mission of making downtown Minneapolis a cleaner, greener, safer, and more vibrant community.

Anyone who has spent time downtown has likely seen the impact of Mpls DID—their team members, easily recognized by their bright green hats and jackets, can be found in every corner of the city, offering smiles, assistance, and a welcoming presence.

From the start, the partnership between DFC and Mpls DID has been a natural fit.

“When we learned of DFC, we felt a strong alignment of values, and chose to partner with DFC because of the mutual benefit: DID gets to deepen our relationship with local students who live here and have investment in this community, and DFC students get to learn about working in downtown Minneapolis and the diverse audience we serve at the Nicollet Community Space,” said Cheyenne Johnson, Mpls DID Manager of Community Engagement.

This summer, DFC sophomore Alyx Ayala Lopez joined the Mpls DID team. After a successful summer, Alyx was invited to continue their work through the school year.



Downtown
Improvement
District

The Power of Internships

“Alyx has been a delight to work with,” Cheyenne shared. “They have repeatedly pushed themselves out of their comfort zone to learn skills and help the community in a variety of ways. They are thorough and dependable, and they take feedback well. Alyx has increased their interpersonal and customer service skills immensely and is much more confident and comfortable speaking with people than when they started. They have learned how to describe what we do and what this space is confidently and independently.”

Reflecting on their experience, Alyx shared how much they’ve grown professionally. “The skills that I think are most important for me to do this internship are being able to communicate effectively with people and maintain open communication. I developed this skill during my internship by talking to people. I learned that sometimes its ok to walk away from people. I didn’t feel so comfortable walking away from people, but this internship helped me see that its ok to do so.”

For Alyx, the most rewarding part of their internship has been helping others. While nonprofit work isn’t their intended career path, the experience has helped them find their passion for special education.

“I want to go into special education,” Alyx explained. “This internship helped me realize how much I enjoy helping people—and that I want to make a positive impact in everything I do.”

Over the years, Mpls DID has provided DFC interns with meaningful experiences that develops communication, teamwork, problem-solving, and project coordination—skills that serve them well in any future career.

The DFC Professional Internship Program looks forward to continuing this strong partnership with Mpls DID and creating more opportunities for students to grow, serve, and shine in the heart of downtown Minneapolis.

