



Rev. James A. O'Brien, S.J. – *Education and Religion*

Teacher, priest, social justice advocate, mentor, friend, servant leader are just some of the words that people use to describe Fr. O'Brien. Born April 7, 1927, he is one of eight children born to James W. and Julia O'Brien. Ordained a priest in 1960, he stayed in Baltimore for two years, continuing his studies and volunteering on weekends. He received a bachelor of arts and master of arts from Loyola University, Chicago.

He is the longest serving Jesuit priest at Wheeling University. In 1962, the young Jesuit priest arrived at Wheeling College to teach philosophy. He remembers the long car ride from Baltimore to Wheeling along U.S. 40 – a time when I-70 was still being planned and two-lane roads were the norm.

The self-proclaimed “new kid on the block” wasn't assigned to a residence hall that first year, but found himself living with 12 senior men off-campus in Avalon House – a home owned by the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston on Frances Avenue. He taught ethics and was long concerned with questions of justice and peace as well as hands-on involvement with students in Appalachian settings and applications. His research interests included the Philosophy of the Human Person and the Philosophy of Jesuit education.

During the mid-1960s, Fr. O'Brien took an academic leave of absence to complete work on his doctorate at Duquesne University. Still assigned to Wheeling during this time, he spent the bulk of his finishing course work at the Pittsburgh university.

The 1970s Appalachian Bishops Pastoral Letter – *This Land is Home to Me* – served as a call to action for Fr. O'Brien. He organized the first Appalachian Experience Club in 1978 to help those in need in southern West Virginia. Father, along with students, would chop wood to heat the homes of the less fortunate and enjoy the rural setting each fall and spring break. While the club no longer exists, its

mission, to serve others, has blossomed into the university's Appalachian Institute. He believed service was a way for students to take a break from studies while experiencing cultures that they might not see in a metropolitan area. “You get better insight as to why people are poor. These experiences keep you grounded.” Today, now in its 21st year, the institute continues to promote research, service and advocacy for/with the people of the region – keeping his dream to build healthier, stronger, and more sustainable communities alive today.

Fr. O'Brien served as an active member at Wheeling Jesuit University for more than 50 years. Today, while retired and a resident of the Colombiere Jesuit Community in Baltimore, he continues to serve the university community as an active member of the alumni association. Many people believe Fr. O'Brien is an example to countless men and women who have walked the campus. While he may think of himself only as a familiar face, alumni have a much different view. Many believe he has made a significant impact on their lives.

Each year during Alumni Weekend, the Alumni Council presents the James O'Brien, S.J. Award, to recent graduates who manifest a growing competence in their chosen field, and whose personal life reflects the university's mission of educating “men and women for life, leadership and service to others.”

He last visited campus in October 2021 for Homecoming Weekend activities.

Fr. O'Brien hopes he will always be remembered as a person of faith. “There is a line in an old verse that says one should ‘live by the side of the road and be a friend to those who pass by.’ That's what I've tried to do – be a faithful person to God and others.”