

The many facets of Gannon's life enrich his writing and teaching

BY JON WILSON

SURROUNDED BY BOOKS and the laurels of a distinguished academic career, Michael Gannon chatted casually about his background and his unusual path toward scholarship, teaching, and literary success. Then, out of the blue, he made a startling confession:

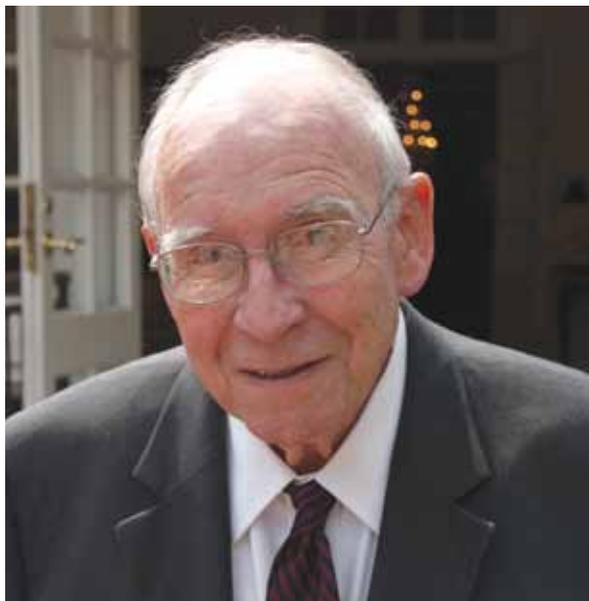
“I was a very bad student. I was a dropout because I was bored with school,” said the acclaimed scholar now known as the “dean of Florida historians.”

Gannon, 83, recently received the inaugural Florida Lifetime Literary Achievement Award for his broad range of work in nonfiction, fiction, and drama. A former Catholic priest and civil rights activist, he became one of the most influential professors at the University of Florida. “He has taught so many people who have gone on to lead Florida in so many areas: politics, academics, law, business,” said Kathleen Deagan, one of his former students and a distinguished Florida archaeologist.

But the world of academics did not attract the young Mike Gannon. He grew up in St. Augustine during World War II, when the education on the streets was much more interesting than the book learning in staid St. Joseph Academy, the Catholic school he attended.

He and his two brothers were raised by their mother, Mary Lee Ayers Gannon, who drove to Florida from Washington, D.C., in a Ford V8 after her husband, career Army officer Michael V. Gannon, died of an infection at age 44. The nation's capital was too expensive for a service widow with children, and Mary Gannon intended to try Florida, stopping at the first Florida town she and her children liked. It turned out to be St. Augustine.

There, the young Mike Gannon rubbed elbows with author Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings and her husband Norton Baskin, who lived in the Castle Warden Hotel. Rawlings, a Pulitzer Prize winner for her novel *The Yearling*, liked to visit the lending library operated by Gannon's mother on Aviles Street.



Michael Gannon at the Lifetime Literary Achievement Award ceremony in the garden of the Governor's Mansion on March 24.

Photo by Carlton Ward Jr.

Zora Neale Hurston, who had yet to become a literary icon, was a paper-route customer for Mike Gannon. He also worked at a grocery store. And for no pay, the 130-pound center on the Academy football team went to work covering games for Harvey Lopez, sports editor of the *St. Augustine Record*.

When Lopez was drafted to help the war effort, publisher A.H. Tebault put Gannon in charge of the sports page—still at no salary, but with responsibility for a column called “Out of the Huddle, with Mike Gannon.”

Father Joseph Devaney, assistant pastor at the cathedral

in St. Augustine, offered the fledgling writer a helping hand. “He told me not to use so many adjectives and adverbs, and to read Red Smith in the *New York Daily Tribune*, that he was ‘the finest English language stylist we have in this country today,’” Gannon said.

The priest even spent some of his meager salary to buy Gannon a subscription to the *Tribune* so the young man could read the sports columnist on a regular basis. “It's one of the kindest things anyone ever did. He has remained a hero all my life,” said Gannon, who still mists up at the memory of the priest's thoughtfulness.

Gannon also became a sports announcer, broadcasting play-by-play for big-time college football games in the South for radio stations in St. Augustine; Greenwood, S.C.; and Columbia, S.C.

“I just put school out of my mind, much to the distress of my mother,” he said. “But I finally wised up.”

The Castle Warden Hotel, where writer Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings lived in St. Augustine.

Photo: Florida State Archives



The catalyst for this came in the form of Havilah Babcock, an outdoorsman, writer, and scholar who appeared as a guest on Gannon's radio show. The two hit it off, especially after the professor learned that Col. Harold P. Sheldon, a famous outdoors writer, had given Gannon a 20-gauge shotgun.

Babcock, chair of the University of South Carolina English Department, took an interest in the young sports announcer and persuaded him to take a course. This experience so engaged Gannon that he began an educational adventure that took him to bachelor's and master's degrees from The Catholic University of America.

Next came a theology degree from the Universite de Louvain in Belgium. Gannon was ordained a priest in 1959. Then the church sent him to the University of Florida to get a Ph.D. in any subject he chose. He received his doctorate in history in 1962.

That same year, the church sent Gannon to the opening session of the Second Vatican Council—and back to St. Augustine to take charge of the Mission of Nombre de Dios, the site of the first permanent Catholic mission in the United States, founded in 1565. It was the perfect job: Gannon's hometown was preparing for its 400th anniversary; and the Spanish colonial era was one of his academic specialties.

The celebration years of 1964–65 also set a high-profile stage for civil rights leaders. Gannon wanted to help, but he had to be discreet because church authorities had forbidden clergy to take part in demonstrations. "I tried to keep the peace, and keep people from getting hurt during the marches," Gannon said.

Perhaps his biggest success was the quiet integration of the Ponce de Leon Motor Lodge, where Mrs. Malcolm Peabody, wife of a retired Episcopal bishop and the mother of the Massachusetts governor, had been arrested while demonstrating. Twelve days after that incident, Gannon and three African-American couples went to eat at the lodge's segregated restaurant.

"The manager said, 'Father Gannon, we don't want any trouble,'" Gannon recalled. "I said, 'Neither do we. We just want lunch.' The manager looked outside to see if there were anyone like reporters or protestors there, and there

Photo: Florida State Archives



The civil rights "wade in" at St. Augustine Beach in 1964.

weren't any. He seated us. We had lunch. We integrated it very quietly. We were treated very courteously, and the other patrons paid us no mind."

The incident was never publicized. "I did my best in a covert way," Gannon said.

In 1967, he returned to the University of Florida, signing on to teach both religion and history. He also became pastor of the student parish, making him both a full-time professor

and a full-time chaplain. Eventually, he chose to concentrate on academics, leaving the priesthood in 1976.

Gannon estimates that he taught more than 16,000 students during his academic career. In 1979 the University of Florida Foundation asked alumni to choose their most influential professor. The alumni chose Gannon, an honor that

still moves him. "Next to this [Lifetime Literary Achievement Award], it is the most precious thing that ever happened to me," he said.

What's next? Gannon is working on a book, but as is his custom, he will not reveal the subject. "An old saying among writers is that the book you talk about is the book that won't get finished."

Gannon writes his books the old-fashioned way, putting pen to paper rather than using a computer. "It will ruin my reputation, but with this recognition from the Florida Humanities Council, and from the state of Florida, I think I can stop apologizing to my computer geek friends. I have always composed with ballpoint

pens and a yellow pad. It's as though when I write, I feel the words and I follow the rhythm," he said. "It helps, as Father Devaney said, to keep my writing lean."

Now he and Genevieve Haugen, his wife of 31 years—Gannon calls her Gigi—live in Gainesville's comfortable Brywood subdivision. Five minutes from the University of Florida campus, it is a neighborhood of gently rolling hills, massive oaks, and, in early spring, azalea bushes exploding in bursts of magenta.

It seems the perfect setting for the university's Distinguished Service Professor of History Emeritus—who once was tired of school.

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Photo courtesy of Jane Dominguez, University of Florida



Gannon at the University of Florida in 2006.

To listen to an interview with Michael Gannon, go to FORUM EXTRA! at www.flahum.org.