



The mission of Rocky Mountain Lutheran High School is to use the Word of God to prepare youth as disciples of Christ by developing their spiritual, intellectual, physical, and social skills for lifelong service to their Savior.

**A History of Rocky Mountain Lutheran High School:
The Formation of John Barenz's Vision for Mission**

**By Ben Schmeling
Professor Korthals
12/12/05**

Introduction

The air is thin like it always is in Denver and as I ascend the stairs I smile slightly. Losing my breath reminds me of the first day of school as I entered the southern corner of a rented facility used by Rocky Mountain Lutheran High School. This was my first teaching assignment as the new Latin teacher which was previously held by the former vicar. Turning the corner, I see the halls are being cleaned heralding the arrival of the first day of school. This year will be the first year at Rocky Mountain Lutheran High School where there will be a full four classes, freshman through senior year. The person I was going to speak with today is a friend, co-worker, and also principal of the high school John Barenz. As Vice Principal Rick Lohmiller once said, "He's the one to talk to for the history of RMLHS, it's somewhere in that great consciousness of his." He sits behind his desk working hard like he always does. Directly behind him are the original ten students from the first class of RMLHS. He treats them as a father would his kids, hanging their pictures on his wall at work. That's what John Barenz is, that is what his model for Christian education is. He treats his students like family.

Early Work at Rocky Mountain Lutheran High School

The story of RMLHS practically revolves around John Barenz, called and commissioned to start a high school on the Front Range. He was born in White Sulpher Springs, Montana in September of 1951. His family later moved to North Chicago area where he attended ^{Northwestern}~~Luther~~ Preparatory School and went on to Northwestern College for a year. He smiled when he recalled his school boy age and the torture inflicted by Saturday classes. His whole life his father had told him he was going to be a pastor but like for so

many the thought of languages scared him. The smile on his face soon took the shape of a frown when he recounted going the next year to Dr. Martin Luther College in New Ulm, Minnesota. He informed me that there was no reciprocity between the schools and his religion classes and credits didn't transfer. Even in his early years of education the Lord's hand was at work with John actively shaping his servant.

John recalls how every assignment the Lord had given him proved useful in the setting he now found himself in: starting and running an Area Lutheran High School. His first call was to a one room school house in Geneva, Nebraska. Again, he smiles seeing the similarities between his small class in Nebraska and his first ten students at RMLHS. Next, he served in Zion Lutheran School of Denver and later moved on to Minnesota Valley Lutheran.

John spoke a little about his experience in Minnesota and admitted that although he had a tough go of it nevertheless the Lord was still grooming him. Each year, John was teaching many and varied courses, some for only year. Although he was called to teach only religion and history at MVL, he ended up teaching everything from music, physical education, math, to coaching girls and boys sports. He explained how this taught him to adapt and find joy and respect for many different subjects, a skill no doubt needed in the small staff of RMLHS and yet carrying all the courses of any high school.

During his ten years at MVL the Lord also taught him about the need to keep, appreciate and retain good teachers and staff. John recalled that forty-four teachers came and went during his ten years at MVL. He noted there never really seemed to be a care for one another and it was only a matter of time before each teacher slowly burned out. His current co-workers are very appreciative for the Lord's lesson early on in his career.

There is not a Friday that goes by without the principal or another teacher bringing treats for the staff. The meetings are held promptly and at appropriate lengths so as not to take undue time away from family. Gifts are exchanged every Christmas among the staff and there is never a day that goes by without John Barenz giving you a firm handshake and asking how your day is going. Working at RMLHS one knows he is appreciated by his co-workers even if he doesn't feel so by his students.

All of these experiences helped John with his vision for mission with RMLHS. But how did he get called to serve RMLHS if it didn't exist yet? Back even as early as 1979 a man named Lanny Prahll was the influencing force to start laying plans for a high school.

It was sort of natural for my wife and I [Lanny Prahll] to promote the idea of RMLHS, since my father was quite instrumental in starting FVL in Appleton, Wisconsin. In addition Karen and I attended FVL and so to speak began our life together there. I cannot take credit for the idea as it was evident to me that our Lord and Savior used my life's experiences to direct us to this event. I always felt He would provide the necessary means when the time was ready for His churches in the Colorado Conference to be moved to accomplish the fact. I was hoping it would in time for our children to take advantage of the Christ Centered high school opportunity. Unfortunately that was not to be. My wife and I have always let our lives be directed by whatever God had in mind for us. I would say that is the main impetus for germinating the RMLHS idea.¹

Through men like Lanny the idea of an ALHS was planted in the churches of the Front Range. Soon afterwards, a board of directors was established consisting of one pastor (Del Kannenberg—pastor at Zion) and two layman.² The going was slow. The 21 years that followed from 1979 to 2000 only \$28,000 was raised for the start of

¹ Email correspondence with Lanny Prahll on November 5, 2005

² Lanny Prahll and Rev. Del Kannenberg were primarily responsible for keeping the thought of a high school going through the 80's and 90's.

a high school. In order to get a high school off the ground there had to be more money.

That money came through the generous offering of an anonymous source. Albert Schwann, the little brother of the “well-known” Schwann boy, gave a major gift of \$225,000 to research the need for an ALHS on the Front Range. The money was designated to cover the costs of a person’s salary for three years. At the end of such a time he would give the report whether there is enough backing to get a high school off the ground.

On August 1, 2000 the committee extended a call to John Barenz. Prior to him eight other calls were all given to pastors. John comments how it was “weird” for them to call a teacher to head up this project. Nevertheless, he saw how the Lord had orchestrated his life up until this point and knew he could help. He had fostered understanding in every area of school life from big schools to little, from curriculum committees to coaching, and from sports programs to boards. John felt his biggest asset was his “need to understand people and love them.”

There was a great need in the Front Range, a very great need indeed—the people needed Christ and good Christian education. The WELS Parish Assistance called FORWARD with Lutheran Schools published a report intended for Lord of Life Lutheran Church in April of 2003. Much of the data in this report is from the 2000 census which would have been around the time John Barenz was doing his research. Yet, admittedly John never consciously looked at many stats of this census, but mostly his research focused on the reaction of the churches that would be the federation.

This 2000 census supported the conclusion that John Barenz would eventually end up at: the Front Range is ready for a high school, a Christian high school!

Growth was immanent.

As of 2000 census, there were 82,384 people estimated to be living in Thornton. As of 2002, the population of Thornton was estimated to be 94,286, or an increase of 11,902 or 14.44% in two years. In contrast, Adams County has grown by an estimated 7.4% over the same time period.³

The Front Range was exploding with new growth. The people are being attracted by the nice weather, the beautiful mountains and the economic growth. The median age was a ripe old age of 30.8 and most dual income households reported an income of \$141,300.⁴ The beautiful Front Range was the place to be for raising families and it should be the place to be for opening a school to fit their children's need for education.

RMLHS was needed not only for exceptional private education, but also for exceptional religious education. Colorado for the most part is unchurched. Thelma Brewer, the Director of Children's Ministries at Northern Hills Community Church had this to say about doing the Lord's work in the community. "The Front Range is the third most unchurched area in the United States. If you filled every church in Thornton to capacity, 95% of the population would not be able to find a seat."⁵ This need for Christ and quality education lends itself well with what RMLHS is prepared to give.

After receiving his call John's preliminary research took him on a whirl wind tour to principal's and pastor's offices, churches, and schools both public and private.

³ LaGrow and Troge, Analytical Report and Conclusions for Lord of Life Ev. Lutheran Church, p8

⁴ LaGrow and Troge, p9

⁵ LaGrow and Troge, p12

He first visited with all of the WELS pastors on the Front Range to talk about the high school concept. After many two, three, four hour meetings where John listened to what they thought about a high school he admits he was pretty depressed. "I didn't think it had a chance," he remarked. He also held meetings with parents which he recalls were poorly attended. Things didn't seem as they were going well for John and his vision of RMLHS.

John reported to the board of advisors the thoughts and expressions of the pastors and parents he had met with. The conclusion John reached was that the typical model for an ALHS or a Preparatory School (like one would find in the Midwest) will not work in Colorado. The board posed the question, "What model will work in Colorado?" This got John thinking. He had to come up with a different paradigm and a different manner of doing things.

John took the next six months and visited as many Christian schools and public schools as he could. John literally researched hundreds of schools and conducted as many interviews. His interview process was simple. It was to cut to the heart of the matter. What was the best thing that you do at your school? John thought that every school has something unique to them and focused specifically for their student body. Some of the great ideas he received were going out to Boondocks (a children play-place with go-karts, mini golf and an arcade) for the first day of school. The idea was that the kids would like coming back to school and would look forward to another year at school with their teachers and classmates. Or perhaps the idea of a practical arts week where students participate in hands on learning of very practical trades such as auto mechanics, landscaping, interior design, web design, etc.

RMLHS grew out of the input received from these interviews and many other unique and different ideas from pastors, staff, and the kids in Colorado. The model for ministry was starting to take shape for John Barenz.

Getting closer to solidifying his model of RMLHS he went out again to all the congregations on the Front Range and made his presentations. John presented the people in Colorado with a vision of a high school that they could be proud of in four to five years.

It finally came down to voting time. Was this a ministry for our youth that we will want to support and be able financially to support? On January 27, 2002 out of the 24 delegates that voted 23 answered with an astounding YES! Later on in the fall of that year RMLHS was born. August 25, 2002 ten students enrolled in the freshman class. All the courses were taught by either one or the other of their staff of two: John Barenz or Rick Lohmiller. They had no money to lease a building at this point so they worshipped, held classes and participated in sports at Lord of Life Lutheran Church. Ironically it was only one and a half miles away from where they would rent facilities the following year. RMLHS was born by the grace of God and carried out by the conviction and trust of 23 brave souls.

Rocky Mountain Lutheran High School Facilities and Staff

The high school currently resides in rented facilities of North East Middle School. John Barenz jokingly says, "We are the largest ALHS in the synod!" What he means of course is that "if" the building were all ours the square footage alone

would far surpass any ALHS in the WELS. But in actuality RMLHS only rents eight rooms on the south side of the building which is about a half and a half.⁶

Interestingly enough John's prophetic words almost came true. RMLHS almost had the opportunity to buy North East Middle School. Because of the enormous growth in Thornton and Northglenn (two adjoining cities) the need for newer educational facilities arose. This resulted in Adam's Twelve School District not using North East Middle School which had been built and given to the city by some philanthropist. It was rented out to church groups, YMCA, Northland Lutheran High School (LCMS), Lord of Life Lutheran Grade School, and various other smaller organizations so as not to sit empty and incur debt. In 2004 John Barenz approached Adam's Twelve and put in an offer of 1 million dollars to buy the building hoping to have gained a permanent home for RMLHS. In the dealings with the lawyers a clause was found prohibiting the city from ever selling the building to a non-profit organization.⁷ Since last year, RMLHS has been working with Adam's Twelve and their lawyers to change the clause and therefore sell the building to RMLHS.

Perhaps buying North East Middle School was not meant to be. Certainly a good indication of that was the incessant vandalization that took place during the 2004-2005 school year. But when the Lord closes one door he opens another. An anonymous donor has committed to giving a parcel of 20-30 acres to RMLHS anywhere the high school chooses to build.⁸ All that is needed is the money to back up such a building project on the committed land. What will RMLHS facilities look like in the future? Where will they be? Time will tell but the future seems bright.

⁶ RMLHS Board of Director minutes for July 11, 2004

⁷ RMLHS Board of Directors minutes for June 20, 2004

⁸ RMLHS special federation meeting's minutes, Sunday July 13, 2003

The facilities aren't what make RMLHS special, the people are. RMLHS has been blessed with a talented and ever increasing staff. RMLHS is supported by 13 congregations in the federation ranging from Colorado Springs in the South to Fort Collins in the North. They have a student body of 65 kids which is growing daily and a staff of ten to support their needs.⁹

John Barenz proudly said, "Good schools are good because you have good teachers." An example of one such teacher is "retired" Pastor Eugene Ahlswede.

Ever since I have been in the ministry I have had a special interest in missions. Through my wife's teaching in Tucson, I became acquainted with Spanish speaking people. As I saw the flood of Mexican people coming to Denver, I became involved with our inner city mission. Because of this interest, I began taking class in Spanish at the age of 60. I loved it. My wife and I went to Mexico for a few weeks to attend a language school in a town called Cuernavaca. Over the last years I have been doing all I could to learn about the Latino culture and the Spanish language. When my job for the synod as mission counselor was terminated, I was left with out a call but I still wanted to serve in the Kingdom.

When our high school needed a Spanish teacher I was called. Though I am by no means fluent in Spanish, I accepted the call, most of all, because I want to send out a host of Spanish speaking missionaries who will carry the message of Christ into the Latino community. Beside teaching vocabulary and grammar, I try to get the students to understand the great mission field that they live in and to have a loving concern for these many sheep that are really without a Shepherd.¹⁰

Eugene had been a home-mission consultant serving the synod before cut backs ended his job. He admits he was heart broken because of this but sees how very visibly the Lord is now working through him. Even at his "retired" age and the health complications with his wife this past year he has been a model of Christian behavior and virtue and has served his school and Lord well. Gene's jokes, wit,

⁹ Rmlhs.org accessed on Dec 2,2005

¹⁰ A personal email with Eugene on November 3,2005

personality and ability to overcome obstacles at his point in life¹¹ are all testimonies to the Lord's grace to him, his wife Vicky, and RMLHS.

Another such teacher where the Lord's guiding hand directed him to RMLHS is Dr. Eric Brucker. Eric was working in Boulder, Colorado at Baxter Health Care Labs where he was only one hundred out of six thousand employees researching blood diseases. Eric continues the story in an email correspondence dated November 12, 2005.

After five years there [Baxter Labs], I was definitely looking to get back into academics. Fortunately, RMLHS was just starting, so I asked John Barenz, then the Mission and Ministry Developer, if I could help by teaching a class. Our plan was to evaluate the situation for that first year, to see if I was a good fit for the school and if the school was a good fit for me. In November of that first year, John and Rick Lohmiller, the assistant principal, asked if I would be willing to leave my current research position and become a full-time teacher for the next school year, provided this was God's will as well. During that same week, my company closed down our division and laid off all 100 or so of the research scientists and technicians. I joke that while Gideon needed a second sign, I was too scared after the first one to ask for a second... I accepted the full-time call from the board of RMLHS.

The stories can be multiplied but the truth comes up over and over again. The Lord brings together talented individuals whose gifts complement one another. Probably the best and last example of God's guiding hand on behalf of RMLHS is Kelly Presser. Kelly was the first woman teacher on RMLHS staff and they sure needed her! Her jobs are extensive. She teaches Math Analysis, Computers, Christian Wellness along with coaching every season and doing a drama in the spring. She has been a blessing to the faculty and adds a woman's touch to everything she does. Kelly came onto the staff again through God's Providence. She was at her home congregation when by chance she

¹¹ Gene traveled to Mexico where he learned Spanish in his mid-sixties

and John Barenz met at the coffee pot. They talked over a cup of Joe and she informed him she was a student at the Colorado School of Mines in Golden, Colorado and majoring in Math and Computer Science. John Barenz confronted her with the idea of teaching Computer Applications to which she quickly agreed. Upon her graduation from college she received a full-time call to RMLHS and is presently continuing her studies going for her Masters of Education. I think Kelly speaks for all of the staff when she says,

The blessings of this job I feel are endless. I feel the biggest blessing is like I stated above in the Why... working with teens and building relationships with them. Teens are so interesting... They always have a story to share or a problem to deal with. I get to be involved in an important time in their lives. Not only am I just their teacher, but I am someone they can talk to or that they come to when they have a problem. Everyday is different and exciting- a true blessing.¹²

RMLHS has been blessed with a dedicated inspiring staff who were all brought together by God's wisdom. Those instructors I felt highlighted God's guiding hand in bringing the proper gifts together for the well being of his kingdom.

Rocky Mountain's Model and Ministry

RMLHS is a school that takes its mission seriously. They exist to train youth as disciples of Christ for lifelong service to their Savior.¹³ During a faculty in-service meeting during the summer of 2004 John had this to say. "To me, relationships are the key to effective youth ministry—the most interesting curriculum will never be absorbed if the primary focus in youth ministry is not built on solid, encouraging, positive

¹² Email correspondence November 7, 2005

¹³ www.rmlhs.org accessed on Dec 3, 2005

Christian relationships with our students.”¹⁴ This is the foundation that RMLHS built its model for ministry; on the concept of relationships.

John further posed the question, “Who is educating and influencing our students?”

He cited statistics like:

- 40% of kids will go to bed in homes without a father tonight.
- 40% of WELS confirmands will become inactive on the day of their confirmation—this figure will grow to nearly 70% by the end of high school.
- By graduation, the graduate in America will have watched 23,000 hours of TV and spent 11,000 hours in the classroom.
- Students listen to an average of 2 hours of music per weekday and 5 hours per weekend day.¹⁵

John started with the presupposition that all the kids who would come to RMLHS would be in different levels of sanctification so RMLHS needed to adapt its teaching for those different levels.

The goal will be to help our students grow and develop into a mature disciple of Christ. We will do this by developing goals for each spiritual level and “programs” to meet these spiritual needs of students at that level...The bottom line is not how many kids are coming to our high school or your youth group, but where will our current students be in five to ten years from now and how are we preparing them to be lifelong followers of Jesus.¹⁶

If RMLHS’ goal is to make disciples and the premise that John has laid forth is meeting our students on their different levels of sanctification, what are the marks of disciples, especially teen disciples that RMLHS should focus on? John came up with but is not limited to three. The marks of a teen disciple are foremost the attitude of a servant, growth in the word, and being a witness for Christ.¹⁷

¹⁴ Faculty In-Service hand-out entitled, RMLHS Youth Ministry, July 2004, p2

¹⁵ Board of Director Minutes for December 12,2004

¹⁶ Board of Directors Minutes for December 12,2004

¹⁷ Faculty In-Service hand-out entitled, RMLHS Youth Ministry, July 2004, p8

One of the unique ways John and the staff at RMLHS seek to foster the Christian's attitude for service is something he calls "Living the Difference." The students are giving off of school to do some sort of church, special need, or social project.

The RMLHS website describes the goal in Living the Difference in this way:

Following the way of Jesus is certainly a challenge in our society and culture today. The RMLHS student is given many opportunities to serve Christ by serving others through experiential learning. Our students are also given daily instruction in God's Word so that they might grow in faith and love for Jesus.¹⁸

The results are tremendous! The students learn crucial life lessons such as the satisfaction of doing a job well done or working in teams. But by far the most remarkable and uplifting result is to see 50-60 high school kids caring for someone other than themselves. That is the love of Jesus, that is Living the Difference.

Spiritual growth is a goal at every Christian School. RMLHS doesn't just have chapel and religion classes but they also take time for spiritual growth in a more personal setting through small group prayer and bible study. The students call these Prayer Huddles. Instead of going to homeroom before starting a regular class day of school, once a week teens will get together with their faculty advisor and fellow students in their Prayer Huddles. They talk about the joys and sorrows of their Christian life. They pray for one another and read bible passages. Through these Prayer Huddles they grow familiar with one another and become more and more comfortable talking about God's word to each other. These young Christians grow in their faith.

The final mark of a disciple is being a witness. This is done in many and varied ways. The Eagle Choir travels to area congregations and witnesses about the love of their Savior through song. Also, the kids are exposed to different teachers and different

¹⁸ www.rmlhs.org accessed on December 2,2005

beliefs. Once a year the staff is taken over by area pastors who sign up to teach a week long unit on different religions and how RMLHS students might understand, approach and reach out to them with the gospel.

Conclusion

RMLHS seeks to train up disciples of Jesus not just in the teen years but for a lifelong service to God. RMLHS model of ministry focuses on relationships with their students in small groups and diverse outings like Living the Difference. Their hope is always leading these young Christians into a life of mature faith and mature actions. Anyone who has bumped into a RMLHS student or will be blessed in the years to come to have them standing behind the pulpit or in front of a class teaching their kids or even working on one of the church's many committees will thank God for the dedicated staff, the vision and model of RMLHS, and our gracious God who accomplished it all.

Bibliography

Note to the reader: the vast majority of this paper focuses around an interview held with John Barenz, principal and mission director, of Rocky Mountain Lutheran High School August 5, 2004. The rest of the sources were taken from email correspondences, conversations over the phone, or through RMLHS Board's minutes. The focus of this paper deals with John Barenz and what led up to his model for ministry at RMLHS.

Supplementary Information

Board of Director Minutes: June 20, July 11, and December 12 of 2004

Email Correspondences:

- ✓ Lanny Prah on November 5, 2005
- ✓ Eugene Ahlswede on November 3, 2005
- ✓ Kelly Presser on November 7, 2005

Faculty In-Service Meeting, July 2004

LaGrow, George E., Troge, Kurt W, *Analytical Report and Conclusions for Lord of Life Ev. Luterhan Church*, WELS Parish Assistance, FORWARD with Lutheran Schools, April 2003

Rocky Mountain Lutheran High School Special Federation Meeting's Minutes, July 13, 2003

RMLHS website, www.rmlhs.org, accessed December 3, 2005