St. Thomas president Julie Sullivan saw opportunity with ouster from MIAC sports

By Rachel Blount

Early in her tenure as St. Thomas president, Julie Sullivan decided it was a question worth exploring. Why had the Tommies athletic department remained in Division III, when the schools she viewed as its national peers — Catholic universities such as Marquette, Creighton and San Diego — all played Division I sports?

“Our profile looked like all those universities, in terms of having a very strong mission, a deep liberal arts foundation, a number of excellent professional schools,” Sullivan said. “But we looked different in that athletic dimension. I wondered about [D-I] for St. Thomas, but I decided it was a bad idea early on.”

Sullivan dropped the thought because the Tommies were happy in the Minnesota Intercollegiate Athletic Conference, and she found no support for a 12-year reclassification process leading to an uncertain future. Had it not been kicked out of the MIAC last year, she said, St. Thomas still would be in Division III.

That painful rejection, though, opened the door for Sullivan to make a bold move that will transform the athletic department — just as she’s done in other areas during her seven-year tenure.

The first layperson and first woman to serve as president, Sullivan, 63, brought St. Thomas into a new era simply by accepting the job in 2013. Since then, she has continued to push the university forward, positioning it for the future while strengthening its 135-year-old roots as a Catholic liberal-arts institution.

She has overseen the opening of the Dougherty Family College, a two-year program that gives students from underserved communities a pathway to a bachelor’s degree, and the Morrison Family College of Health. A school of nursing is coming soon. The campus is expanding, with 14 new buildings expected to be added by 2027. (Information was taken from a 2016 report)

Though many describe her as a visionary, Sullivan would rather chat with students on the quad than dwell in an ivory tower. Campus leaders said her grand ideas are not “pie in the sky,” but backed up with study and planning, and carried out with action.

“She is the embodiment of a servant leader,” said Buffy Smith, associate dean of academics for Dougherty Family College. “When she shares a vision, she’s like a coach, motivating and inspiring us. But she’s right there with us, too, rolling up her sleeves and saying, ‘Let’s work together to make this a reality.’ ”

In this case, her vision is geared toward the future, but respectful of the past. While Sullivan expects Division I sports to enhance St. Thomas’ national profile and diversify its student body, she plans to make the shift in a way that remains true to the university’s core mission.

“We are not going to develop an athletic program that’s going to compete in the SEC,” Sullivan said. “We’re developing a program to compete in the Summit League. And I think it’s important that we’re making this move with a strong culture already in place.

“It’s a culture that strives for excellence, but it’s always been about developing student-athletes as better men and women. We want to continue to strengthen what we already do well.”

Part of the vision

A Florida native, Sullivan cheered for the University of Florida’s sports teams as a kid and later earned three degrees there. She was executive vice president and provost at the University of San Diego when Fr. Dennis Dease retired as St. Thomas’ president.

With no obvious successor among local Catholic clergy, the school’s board of trustees cast a wide net in its search. While one trustee said Sullivan’s credentials “jumped off the page,” Mark Vangsgard, the school’s vice president for business affairs and chief financial officer, was skeptical at first.

“She’d never shoveled snow before,” said Vangsgard, a former Tommies football player. “She wasn’t a Tommie. I was thinking, ‘How is this going to work?’

“It wasn’t long before I was convinced. I’ve worked with a lot of for-profit CEOs, presidents and general managers. She’s better than all of them.”

Those who work with Sullivan say she has an unrivaled intellect, but no ego. She seeks out different points of view and truly listens to others. Her work ethic is
so strong, Vangsgard said, that her salary “probably works out to about $5 an hour.”

Sullivan makes friends quickly among all kinds of people, which has helped her build consensus for the change she has led at St. Thomas. She enjoys conversing with students during campus walks with her goldendoodle, Bella. Fr. Monk Malloy, a longtime member of the St. Thomas board of trustees, said Sullivan’s embrace of school history and tradition has made her popular with alumni and boosters.

It’s her zeal for evolution, though, that has defined her time at St. Thomas. MayKao Hang was happily leading the Wilder Foundation last year when Sullivan approached her about becoming founding dean of the College of Health. Hang had no desire to leave Wilder or work in higher education, but she’s nearing her first anniversary at St. Thomas.

“She said she wanted to develop a different type of college of health,” Hang said. “She has a vision for how St. Thomas can stay relevant in an ever-changing higher ed field. Just because nobody’s done it before, that’s not going to stop her.”

Many of those traits are grounded in Sullivan’s religious identity, particularly her devotion to Catholic social teaching. Her faith leads her to approach each day with an open heart and a hungry mind.

“What I relish more than change are opportunities to learn and grow,” Sullivan said. “I tell students not to plan their path out too precisely or too far. Take all the opportunities you have in your current situation. Learn as much as you can. Meet as many people as you can.

“If you get into a prescribed path, you miss probably the most exciting opportunities. I tell people that God has a better imagination than I do. So I just keep learning and growing, and letting him show me where the next opportunity is.”

Leading the way to D-I

That attitude has guided Sullivan along the path to Division I. She recognized one of those serendipitous opportunities when the Tommies were ejected from the MIAC, even as others had their doubts.

Sullivan said she is not “a naïve optimist.” It’s important to distinguish between dreams and fantasies, she noted, and she saw D-I as an achievable goal as long as it had the proper support. Others soon got on board, thanks to her strong relationships throughout the St. Thomas community and its faith in her judgment.

“The most important thing was, the board trusts her,” said Malloy, who called Sullivan one of the best college presidents in the country. “They just needed to be convinced.”

So did the NCAA, which did not allow schools to move directly from D-III to D-I when St. Thomas announced its intention. Malloy, president emeritus of Notre Dame, and Tom Douple, commissioner of the Summit League, both praised Sullivan’s hands-on role in the process to secure NCAA permission. “Without her leadership and vision, none of this would have happened,” Douple said. “We took our swings and our hits along the way, and through it all, she stood tall. She was steadfast that ‘Yes, this is the right thing, and we’re going to move forward.’ ”

Douple will be seeing much more of Sullivan in the years ahead. She intends to be “very involved” in the presidents’ councils of the NCAA and the Summit League, believing St. Thomas can have a positive influence on the future of D-I athletics.

Her vision for the Tommies’ program is crystal clear. Sullivan views athletics as a key to St. Thomas’s mission of whole-person development, and she thinks that role can grow with a D-I budget and staffing. She wants the school to get more involved with supporting youth sports and create stronger bonds with the community.

It’s ambitious, to be sure. But Sullivan wouldn’t have things any other way.

“That is who I am,” Sullivan said. “I want to have an impact. I want to make a difference in a way that’s not just incremental.”

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