hen the doors of Loyola Hall opened in fall 2002, Ignatian Residential College formally began as a living/learning community for 133 sophomores, each of whom had applied for the opportunity to explore—in a multi-faceted way—his or her interests, abilities, and spirit. Through several shared courses, a common living space, small mentor groups, cultural outings, and spiritual retreats, they would consider on an ever-deeper level questions of self-identity and discernment, both tools in the discovery of one’s calling in life.

Established through a $2 million current-use grant from the Lilly Endowment, the program now has some 400 “alumni” living their junior and senior years on campus, along with this year’s crop of 207 sophomores. “Every year, our kids seem more committed to what we are doing,” says Program Director James Mayzik, S.J., noting that many who have experienced the program remain involved as “Companions,” assisting as co-mentors with the adults who volunteer and helping lead specific events. “The Companions move on to a kind of Ignatian leadership on campus—running major clubs and often receiving the Loyola Medal and the Bellarmine Award at graduation.”

Aware of its impact on campus culture and in the lives of individual students, Kim and Steve Bepler recognized in Ignatian Residential College the essential formative elements of Jesuit education, adapted to the needs of the times. A University trustee since 2006, Mr. Bepler’s link to Fairfield is his friendship with University President Jeffrey P. von Arx, S.J., whom he met when Fr. von Arx was dean of Fordham College at Rose Hill, Mr. Bepler’s alma mater.

At the urging of his wife, Mr. Bepler
accepted Fr. von Arx’s invitation to join Fairfield’s Board of Trustees. Along with his service, the couple wanted to make a gift that would perpetuate the Jesuit ideals they espouse. In considering the various goals of the strategic plan now guiding University decision-making, they settled on Ignatian Residential College. In considering what kind of gift they wanted to make, the Beplers opted for an endowed gift, one whose principal would grow in perpetuity while the interest it earned provided annual revenue for the program.

The Beplers’ gift? A generous $1 million. “Both my wife and I felt supporting this program was the best way to give today’s students the classic benefits of Jesuit education, which had been so formative for so many people of our generation,” says Bepler. Recalling his time at Fordham College at Rose Hill as a member of the class of 1964, he explains, “More than half the faculty were Jesuits and there was always one available to talk to in the dorms.” Living in this kind of environment helped facilitate spiritual and academic growth, he asserts. “The structure and goals of Ignatian Residential College model that dynamic, and create a strong intellectual basis for students to discern what they believe in – not just religiously but on social matters, too,” he says.

When he was 10, Stephen Bepler’s family moved from New York to Seattle. They attended the city’s Jesuit parish, and Bepler eventually enrolled in the Jesuit high school there – Seattle Prep. Thus began a lifelong love and appreciation for Jesuit education. For her part, Kim Bepler began working with the Jesuits as a volunteer in the Nativity Schools in New York, and has since become a trustee. “Any contribution of time, talent, and treasure has an immediate effect at these schools,” she says. “Helping make a difference in the lives of so many young people is a blessing I want to share with Steve.”

His deep understanding of what colleges and universities are about, in conjunction with experience gained in a successful business career with the Capital Group, make Bepler a valuable voice of reason. Today he is president and principal investment officer of the Capital

For Kim and Steve Bepler, the decision to endow the Ignatian Residential College program was a “natural,” given their appreciation of how formative a Jesuit education can be.
Twice a year, students in Ignatian Residential College make an overnight retreat, focusing on aspects of the spiritual life that enrich personal and community formation.

World Growth Income Fund. “Steve is incredibly knowledgeable and well informed,” says Fr. von Arx. “He does his ‘homework’ well and cuts immediately to the key and critical issues.”

Contributing to the endowment is a way of perpetuating an aspect of the institution that is central to its core identity and ensures its long-range continuity and viability. Such gifts outlast the life of any college president or donor and become a testament to what they sensed was ultimately important. “What you do for a school like Fairfield can make a big difference,” says Bepler. “You get a lot of value for your charitable giving – a Jesuit education stands for something worth passing along.”

Living in Ignatian Residential College was a powerful experience for Andrew “A.J.” Piper ’08, who has remained involved through the Companions group and is today a resident assistant in its home, Loyola Hall. “What we try to create is a place for residents to feel comfortable simply being themselves; this is where the rewards of the program begin,” he says, noting that it is grounded authentically in today’s culture. “The program helps to bridge self-awareness and the real world, giving students the courage to reflect on their identity and future. Life looks different when those around you are taking an active and honest interest in their own and others’ development.

“Students who embrace the direction
of the program find another layer of depth within themselves,” continues Piper. “The self-analytical questions are as challenging as they come, and while most students do not have the answers, being aware of their importance and struggling with them in a respectful community has an enormous impact.”

According to Fr. Mayzik, the ”experiment” called Ignatian Residential College has attempted to reassert the Jesuit heritage directly into students’ experiences. “I think it goes back to the First Principle and Foundation of St. Ignatius’ Spiritual Exercises – to help students understand what they were made for and what they are meant to do with their lives,” he says. What’s counter-cultural about it is the redirection of focus from the pursuit of success as defined by possessions, power, and prestige, to the transformation of individual potential into competencies and values that also benefit others. “In some ways, getting a college degree is part of a game these kids have learned to play pretty well, one that credentials them into their lives,” says Fr. Mayzik. “Ignatian College offers another set of credentials as well, tools that can orient a person through the changing circumstances of life.”

Through structured mentor groups, an academic program that explicitly addresses career paths, retreats, and a weekly dinner series, participants are encouraged and enabled to engage in meaningful conversations while socializing in the dorm. With this tangible platform, students don’t need an invitation to consider more abstract questions with each other. Arming them with an introspective proficiency is the primary objective of the program. “We try,” says Fr. Mayzik, “to get students to ask themselves: Who am I? Whose am I? What am I called to be? Who do I belong to? What kind of person do I want to be? Who do I want to align myself with? Who owns me? Who do I allow to own me?

“These are questions for life,” Fr. Mayzik continues, “and the answers keep changing.” Maybe so, but thanks to the generosity of Kim and Steve Bepler in launching an endowment specifically for Ignatian Residential College, the life-giving, life-changing questions will keep on coming.

Pausing for casual conversation at the Alex Carrion ’08 memorial are the Rev. James Mayzik, S.J., director, and sophomores Veronica Florentino, Meghan Schelzi, and Spencer Thibodeau. The space was created in memory of Carrion, who died in 2006 while a member of Ignatian College.