

SAVINGS RATES SPECIALS

PASSBOOK SAVINGS ACCOUNT

4.75% APY*

Minimum balance of over \$25,000 to obtain APY

*Annual Percentage Yield (APY) is accurate as of 9/1/24. Fees could reduce earnings on account. Rates are subject to change after account is opened. *For new accounts at Louisville location only.

PASSBOOK SAVINGS ACCOUNT



4.50% APY*


\$5,000 - \$24,999
Minimum balance of \$5,000 to obtain APY

*Annual Percentage Yield (APY) is accurate as of 9/1/24. Fees could reduce earnings on account. Rates are subject to change after account is opened. *For new accounts at Louisville location only.

Louisville Branch

2503 S Hurstbourne Parkway,
Louisville, KY 40220
502-384-6348
gsb.louisville@guardiansavingsbank.com



5 MONTH CD • 4.75% APY*

(Penalty for Early Withdrawal / \$500 Minimum Balance)

*The Annual Percentage Yield (APY) is accurate as of 9/1/24.
*For new accounts at Louisville location only.

2020 PULITZER PRIZE WINNER

If it’s local you want, we’ve got it.

Our Sunday refresh offers more local news and sports, as well as “Weekend Exclusive” content to help you navigate your lives. So, enjoy your Sunday reading filled with stories that will inspire, educate, inform, and entertain you. **FOR THE LATEST LOCAL NEWS >**




Courier Journal

SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 29, 2024

PART OF THE USA TODAY NETWORK

COST OF EMPIRE

As Highlands Latin builds classical education powerhouse, parents and former students describe troubling experiences



**HIGHLANDS
LATIN SCHOOL**

PAGES 12A-13A

“I got the feeling as we left there that they cared more about the reputation of the school than they did about the students that they were teaching.”

Mitch Millard, parent of former HLS student

PHOTOS BY KATE CASSADY / COURIER & PRESS-USA TODAY NETWORK AND GETTY IMAGES

Subscriber-only eNewspaper

The eNewspaper is an electronic copy of your print newspaper. Enjoy every page by going to courier-journal.com/enewspaper or scan this code on your mobile device. You will also find late news and sports in the bonus sections. Check it out today!



Volume 156 | No. 273
Subscribe 800-866-2211
©2024

\$4.49



0 40901 10701 9

Ascent of Highlands Latin and its effects

Ex-students say high-pressure climate affected mental health

Krista Johnson and Josh Wood
Louisville Courier Journal | USA TODAY NETWORK

It began in the 1990s with a few students at wooden desks learning Latin in a Louisville living room.

More than two decades later, the Highlands Latin School has grown into an empire, encompassing more than 20 campuses across more than a dozen states.

That empire includes a publishing affiliate that produces materials for schools and homeschool families, an online academy, and a classical education accreditation body that gives schools its stamp of approval.

In this series

- Today:** As Highlands Latin builds classical education powerhouse, parents and former students describe troubling experiences.
- Monday:** How Louisville's Highlands Latin School became a classical Christian education empire.
- Tuesday:** 'Saving Western Civilization': The Highlands Latin empire's far-right appeal.

Highlands Latin has attracted Louisville parents with billboards boasting about high standardized test scores, and the promise of a rigorous private school education at a low cost.

But the growth from scrappy homeschool Latin classes to classical Christian education juggernaut didn't come easy, particularly for some former students who describe a high-pressure environment that affected their mental health.

That push for perfection was accompanied, they say, by bullying and harsh punishments for seemingly minor infractions.

In "The Cost of Empire," The Courier Journal investigates the rise of Highlands Latin and the lasting effect it has had on some students.

It's been about a decade, but Emily Willing can still recall the shame and embarrassment she felt.

She described standing in the principal's office at Highlands Latin School's Crescent Hill campus, crying as she admitted to writing a poem in class that included a bad word.

It was meant to be a joke shared among friends, but it turned into a spectacle that left a lasting scar on the already self-described insecure and depressed teen.

The 14-year-old had started engaging in self-harm the year prior, sometimes going into the school bathroom to do so.

After admitting to authoring the poem, as she sobbed and apologized profusely, she recalled the principal telling her she "used to be beautiful," and realizing that meant she wasn't anymore.

"It just felt so destroying — soul destroying — to be told that," Willing said. "And so insane to be told that. I knew it was insane at the time, but it also hurt like hell."

Willing, now 25, left the private classical Christian school a few years later.

As Highlands Latin expanded across the nation and its clout within the world of classical Christian education grew, multiple students who attended the school's two Louisville campuses from the early 2000s to 2020 described an overly strict environment that affected them deeply, fueling thoughts of suicide and self-harm for some.

In interviews with The Courier Journal, they described instances of staff members shaming and bullying students, of lessons that they considered discriminatory and a perception that students could be shown the door if they didn't perform to exacting standards.

The students attended HLS over a range of years, including some who went there more than a decade apart, but they talked about their experiences in similar terms.



Highlands Latin School's Crescent Hill location in Louisville.
MICHAEL CLEVINGER/COURIER JOURNAL



"Teachers and students – for a whole year, every single day – would play 'who can make Emily cry first.'"

Emily Berry
former Highlands student

MATT STONE/
COURIER JOURNAL

Parents of former HLS students also shared concerns.

"They are just cold," said one parent, whose child was asked to leave in 2022 at the start of fifth grade. "They advertise a 32 ACT score, but not because they teach kids to be that smart; they just only allow the ones who were always going to get those high scores to be at that school. It's cold."

"They don't go by their advertised Christian values. There's nothing about it Christian at all."

Highlands Latin's head of school, Shawn Wheatley, and Brian Lowe, the son of founder Cheryl Lowe and the school's president, did not respond to repeated requests for interviews.

While some former students allowed The Courier Journal to use their names, others asked that their names, and sometimes other defining information, be withheld. Their reasons for requesting anonymity included having people close to them still involved with Highlands Latin, their desire to move past their school experiences, and the fear of speaking out against what they portrayed as a small, insular community.

The Courier Journal spoke to additional students who, while they described issues at the school, were not comfortable being included with or without their names. Others expressed interest in speaking with a reporter before eventually declining.

Rachael Denhollander, the Louisville woman who was the first to step forward with accusations against USA Gymnastics doctor Larry Nassar, which ultimately led to his lifetime imprisonment, said she has spoken to some ex-HLS students about their experiences and understands their reluctance.

"Anytime somebody speaks out or goes on the record ... there are going to be the online comments, there's going to be the deluge of support that comes out for Highlands Latin," she said. "So, they're encountering a very real dynamic of losing community again and having to fight these battles again."

"You do really risk reprisal from your

own community when you speak up."

'Robotic perfection'

Since the school started in a living room in the 1990s, Highlands Latin has grown into an empire that promises exceptionalism by providing a rigorous classical education rooted in Christian ideology.

A classical education is a liberal arts education that incorporates historical texts and the learning of ancient languages, such as Latin. Classical education — and classical education that combines religious elements, like at Highlands — has been growing in popularity nationwide.

In Louisville, Highlands provides its take on this type of instruction for affordable tuition compared to many of the city's private schools.

But the actual cost, former students said, was a psychological toll that has lasted into adulthood.

"They were building this empire, so to speak, and they never had to answer for anything that was inappropriate, and they didn't have to worry about anybody they mowed down in the process," said Emily Berry, a 2011 graduate of HLS and the granddaughter of famed Kentucky writer Wendell Berry, who for a time taught at the school.

Emily Berry, 31, described an environment where teachers regularly bullied specific students.

The targets, she and other students said, were most often those who weren't achieving academic perfection.

"Teachers and students — for a whole year, every single day — would play 'who can make Emily cry first,'" she recalled. "It was a sport to them to see who could break me every day, and then I was made fun of for crying all the time."

Berry said she began abusing alcohol later in her teens and attempted suicide.

She wrote a poem about HLS, in which she said the school, run by "leaders who fear individuality and demand

Continued on next page

Continued from previous page

robotic perfection,” worked to replace students’ dreams and imagination with “self-loathing and an inability to survive in the real man’s world.”

She called the poem “I Drove by Hell Today.”

Other former students who spoke to The Courier Journal said they engaged in self-harm while at HLS.

One student, who graduated in the mid-2010s, described a teacher who would “belittle” students “sadistically,” frequently leaving classmates in tears and equating failure with disappointing God.

“He would tell us that whenever we got (something) wrong, it was a moral failing ... (that) you decided to not try hard enough to get it right,” the former student said.

As a result of the class, he said, he started self-harming, digging his nails into his back while showering until he bled.

“I felt like: ‘He’s the one who actually gets who I am. He knows how awful I am. He knows how lazy I am. And he’s telling me what no one else is going to tell you,’” he said of the teacher. “I felt like I needed to punish myself.”

Students who ‘on paper, looked spectacular’

Another student, who graduated in 2019, described a similar experience.

Teachers, she said, worked to create a barrier between the students doing well and those who weren’t. Those excelling, she said, were treated as superior.

“In general, the experience was de-humanizing in the biggest way possible,” she said. “Every aspect of the way they treated you was based on academics ... and if you were doing poorly, you would get absolutely mentally annihilated.

“All they cared about was producing people who, on paper, looked spectacular,” and students were taught that they “should be afraid to tarnish the school’s image.”

The stress of that pressure saw her digging her nails into her hands, legs and neck to maintain focus throughout the day and sipping scalding-hot water to jolt her awake when she was feeling sleepy.

Over the course of her last two years at HLS, she said she was having regular panic attacks and crying at her desk each day.

After earning a master’s degree in engineering at age 21, the HLS graduate said: “I cried myself to sleep for two weeks because all I could think about was every little thing I did that wasn’t perfect.”

Looking back, she says she wonders how she didn’t commit suicide.

Matthew Zolla, who graduated from HLS in 2015 and later worked there as a choir teacher, defended the school, but acknowledged not everyone is cut out for it.

He told The Courier Journal the school gave him a strong work ethic, a sense of “brotherhood” and produced graduates who are successful in life.

“If you ask some of my classmates, they’ll say they didn’t like it. It is hard. I don’t think it’s for everyone,” he said. “It requires more of you. You get what you put in.”

The school’s demanding workload and expectations lead some students to “dwindle out,” he said, while “the kids who want to learn as much as they possibly can” remain.

HLS “is almost like the military. When you go through this hard thing together, this challenge, you join this brotherhood,” he said.

One mom, who pulled her children from the school in 2020, said she was happy with the school for the first few years of elementary but noticed a shift when her oldest son reached middle school.

“The workload increased to an unmanageable level,” she said, with hours of homework each night, leaving no time for extracurricular activities.

After leaving, her oldest told his parents while he was still at the school, “he was crying himself to sleep at night because he didn’t think he was good enough,” she said. “I was shocked because he was getting straight A’s and was winning the Latin (spelling) Bee.”

Had they not switched schools, “I don’t know if our oldest son would be alive right now,” the mom said. “I felt like we were being suffocated, like we were living with a pillow over our heads the whole time and didn’t realize it until we got out of that environment.”

Reviews of HLS posted on niche.com, a resource for families looking for a school, echo points former students raised with The Courier Journal.

A 2023 post from a reviewer who said they left HLS in the 11th grade said the school was a “good fit” for them and that they “love” HLS. However, they noted, “a lot of my friends felt looked down upon or like they received unequal



A billboard advertisement for Highlands Latin School is seen on Frankfort Avenue in Louisville on Dec. 28, 2022.

JEFF FAUGHENDER/COURIER JOURNAL

treatment due to their not being as smart as their peers (they were still very smart) or not as religious.”

Another post from last year, from a reviewer who said they spent 11 years as a student at HLS, said “students who perform less than exceptionally are looked down upon” and said “the school experience is one I wouldn’t wish on my worst enemy.”

A blog active in the mid-2010s called “The Real Highlands Latin School,” which claimed to be authored by “concerned parents,” contained a number of criticisms and allegations, including that the administration used “selective dismissals of students” to produce a “highly homogenous population of graduates.”

‘Humiliation as a punishment’

Willing, who authored the poem containing a curse word, said her punishment went beyond the principal’s office.

She said he banned her from volleyball for the rest of the season and made her repeat her apology in front of a crowd.

“He asked all the teachers from the upper school to leave their classrooms and come into my classroom and stand at the back of the class, behind all of my classmates, and watch me cry in front of all of them, say I was sorry for writing a poem with a bad word in it,” Willing recalled.

“In that instance, it was very much like humiliation as a punishment.”

The poem wasn’t the only time Willing believed educators reacted disproportionately to minor infractions.

When she was in elementary school, she spilled a drop of water on a test after taking a sip from a metal water bottle. Her teacher “flew off the handle” and threw the water bottle “as hard as he could at the back wall,” with the projectile flying close to Willing’s head, she said.

Like other former students, Willing felt her value as a person was determined by how the adults at HLS thought of her.

“To me, it felt more like, when the teacher was disappointed in you, when the administration was disappointed in you or not happy with you, that said something about your value as a person. ...HLS was all about tying your value to your actions and your accomplishments

Highlands Latin School

What is it? A private K-12 school in Louisville with two campuses and affiliates across the nation.

How many students does it have? HLS serves about 750 students in Louisville.

When did it start? What would become HLS started in a Louisville living room in the 1990s. The school was formally founded in 2000.

Who founded it? Cheryl Lowe started HLS.

Where are its Louisville campuses? Lowe established a permanent campus in Crescent Hill in the early 2000s. It has since opened a second location on Shelbyville Road.

What about its test scores? The school has a three-year average ACT score of 30.

How much is tuition at HLS? The amount increases as students get older, but it tops out at \$8,300 per year starting in fifth grade.

specifically.”

Suicidal ideation became a common thought line at age 13 for Willing, and she sometimes went to the school bathroom to cut herself.

“There was no encouragement. There was no talk about your feelings. There was no way if you’re struggling, to ask for help. There was none of that at all,” she said.

One former HLS student, who is now a Jefferson County Public Schools elementary school teacher, said she was anorexic in seventh grade, losing 20 pounds over the course of five months. It wasn’t until she needed safety pins to hold her skirt up that staff asked her if she was eating enough.

“I feel like in a public school, it would have been caught a lot earlier,” said the former student, who left HLS in 2015 after finishing eighth grade.

“They could have done a lot more to ensure my safety,” she said, “because I was a child.”

Another student, who is now in her 30s, said an administrator publicly shamed her for her weight and told her not to hug boys, who “couldn’t control themselves,” because of her “large assets.”

During her senior year, when she turned 18, she dyed a strand of her hair pink. In response, the school wanted to expel her and retreated only after her mom begged them not to and agreed to dye her hair back to its natural color immediately, she said.

“Can you imagine as somebody who had been there at that school for a decade ... and they were going to expel me over a piece of pink hair? After all of that work I’d gone through?”

When that student, who wore a size 12 at the time, was unable to fit into a size 10 dress for graduation, that same administrator said they “couldn’t imagine” somebody not fitting into that dress and proceeded to purchase them a size 30 dress, which was far too big.

“It was an isolating school,” she said. Former students who spoke with The Courier Journal portrayed an environment where many parents were unaware of their children’s problems.

“Unfortunately, when you’ve got a lot of families that are super religious, and you don’t talk about hard things, these kids felt so isolated from their parents that their parents had no idea until it was so bad,” said Berry, the 2011 HLS graduate.

On the job review website Glassdoor, a 2022 post from a reviewer who said they were a former Highlands Latin employee, noted a “lack of action surrounding parent complaints about specific teachers,” as well as a “lack of accountability.”

Another Glassdoor review from that year — which overall endorsed the school and was said to be written by a teacher — also said the school was “lacking in accountability (no board, all decisions made ultimately by one person) and some concerning decisions have been made.”

During a classical education conference in 2022, an HLS leader confirmed the school did not have a board of directors, according to a video of the meeting.

Choosing a ‘politically correct’ group to send to hell

Former HLS students also described discriminatory lessons.

One, another HLS graduate who is now in her 30s, recalled an assignment where she and her classmates were asked to write a canto of “Dante’s Inferno,” where somebody from a “politically correct” group was sent to hell.

“So, we had to choose from LGBTQ

Continued on next page



Highlands Latin School campus, on Shelbyville Road in Louisville, is seen on Aug. 29.

MICHAEL CLEVINGER AND SAM UPSHAW/COURIER JOURNAL

Continued from previous page

people, we had to choose from women who had abortions, abortion doctors, anything that was deemed too political-ly correct. We had to write about how we would send them to hell and torture them,” she said.

She said that atmosphere gave her anxiety issues that lasted years after she graduated.

“I had severe anxiety about going to hell for a very long time,” she said. “I was still very religious. I’m bisexual, and I hated myself, because I was still very much like ‘I can’t be this way’...I had been taught at school, and in church, that I was just fundamentally bad.”

Another student who graduated in 2020 — more than a decade after the woman who had the assignment of writing a canto of Dante’s Inferno — re-called several lessons where it was mentioned that homosexuality “wasn’t God’s design.”

“I identify as queer, so I did not feel comfortable speaking about that in that school, at all,” she added. “It felt really odd to hear my classmates debate whether I was immoral or not, not knowing I was sitting there.”

‘I was a bad kid, or so I thought’

Kentucky graduating seniors, on average, earn just shy of a 19 on their ACT college admission test.

But Highlands Latin students, according to the school’s website, earn an average score of 30. In previous years, billboards around Louisville have touted an average score of 31 on the test, which has a top score of 36.

Those high marks attract families who are seeking a rigorous education for their children. A comparatively low private school tuition, a reduced emphasis on technology and the billboards promising “knowledge not nonsense” were also attractive for some.

Mitch Millard said he and his wife were attracted to the school in the early 2000s because it is a private, Christian school that promises small class sizes and a nontraditional workweek that allows for part-time home schooling.

Millard said his son lasted just two years at the school before administrators told him his fifth-grader was “un-teachable.”

“I got the feeling as we left there that they cared more about the reputation of the school than they did about the stu-

“I had severe anxiety about going to hell for a very long time. I was still very religious. I’m bisexual, and I hated myself.”

Highlands Latin School graduate

dents that they were teaching,” he said.

His son, Michael Millard, now 29, said he was a disruptive student who talked in class when he was in elementary school, but he does not believe he was handled properly.

“I was a bad kid, or so I thought. I always thought that I was a bad kid because I was talking in class,” he said.

Michael, who has been a captain flying international routes on Boeing 737s for a legacy airline since he was 26, finds the belief that he was “unteachable” ironic.

“If that’s not teachable, how would you define it?” he asked of his current profession.

More recently, another father said his son was also asked to leave the school.

After his son attended the school from kindergarten through fourth grade, the man said school leadership requested a meeting with him after the first day of fifth grade two years ago.

In that meeting, he said he was told his son was no longer welcome at the school. The reason, he believes, is because of his son’s language processing disorder, which makes standardized tests more difficult.

“He never had a single behavior complaint, nothing like that. He just has a disability, and he’s fighting through it, and he was still doing well,” he said, adding “he dragged their scores down, so they wanted him gone.”

Beyond his son being asked to leave, the father was upset the conversation didn’t happen at the end of the previous school year, before “admissions at almost every other school had closed.”

“It was a very dark period for us,” he said. “It took a lot of discussion with our son to make him understand it wasn’t his fault.”

Reach reporter Krista Johnson at kjohnson3@courier-journal.com. Reach reporter Josh Wood at jwood@courier-journal.com. Former Courier Journal reporter Jonathan Bullington contributed reporting.

How Highlands Latin School, Memoria Press approach teaching

Josh Wood Louisville Courier Journal | USA TODAY NETWORK

Leaders of Louisville-based Highlands Latin School and its related publishing arm, Memoria Press, differentiate their form of classical Christian education from modern American education — which they often term “progressive” — in a number of ways.

To them, “progressive” education teaches students what to think, not how to think. It is focused, they say, on preparing students for jobs and “political indoctrination,” rather than building knowledge and virtue like “traditional” and classical education does.

Modern classrooms are “child-centered” instead of “teacher-led” like at Highlands Latin, and they say educators at those institutions try to make school fun when it should be serious.

Highlands Latin presents its schools as focused on order and obedience, with the teacher meant to appear as an authority figure instead of a friend.

Memorization, which has seen its place diminished in modern education, remains a cornerstone at Highlands Latin, which celebrates sixth-graders who successfully recite all 3,201 words of Thomas Babington Macaulay’s poem “Horatius at the Bridge.”

While things like memorization and penmanship may not be fun for students, they are viewed as essential building blocks at Highlands Latin and Memoria Press.

“Our failure is if we bow to the whims of our children and not teach these important things because our children aren’t having fun in school,” said Tanya Charlton, Memoria Press’ director of operations and curriculum in a 2020 video posted to YouTube. “Our failure is if we bow to the progressive siren’s voice that is telling us that our children should love school and love all that they are learning.”

The seriousness — or “gravitas” as Highlands Latin and Memoria leaders phrase it — of school extends to even the youngest students.

“They learn that school is not for entertainment. Because if you just bring them in, and you’re a glorified child care service, and you’re doing fun things all the time, they’re going to get the idea that school is for fun things and not serious things,” said Martin Cothran, who founded Memoria Press’ online academy and later directed the Classical Latin School Association accreditation body, in a 2021 podcast.

Reach Josh Wood at jwood@courier-journal.com or on X at [@JWoodJourno](https://twitter.com/JWoodJourno). Reach Krista Johnson at kjohnson3@gannett.com or on X at [@KristaJI993](https://twitter.com/KristaJI993)

 LUXURY ESCAPES.COM

Get *more*
on your next Vacation

More Value

Save up to 60% on exclusive offers you won't find elsewhere

More Inclusions

Find handpicked extras and value add-ons, from free-flowing drinks to all-inclusive dining

More Options

Discover everything you need with thousands of hotels, tours, cruises, flights, experiences and more

More Expertise

24/7 customer service by phone or email from a trusted team of travel experts

Prices include all Taxes and Fees for Two Guests



The Shore at Katathani
Award-Winning Phuket Private Pool Villa Retreat

3 Nights From
\$1,139
Includes taxes & fees
Hotel + flights from \$2,997* Per Room

Phuket, Thailand

Save Up To 15%



5-Star Africa Safari
Southern Africa Safari with Five-Star Kruger Lodge Stay & Victoria Falls Sunset Cruise

9 days 4 places From
\$4,487
/ Per Person
Starts in Johannesburg.
Ends in Victoria Falls

Save Up To 15%



Nandini Jungle By Hanging Gardens
Five-Star Ubud Boutique Retreat within Payangan Rainforest

3 Nights From
\$713
Includes taxes & fees
Per Room

Ubud, Bali

Save Up To 12%



InterContinental Bora Bora Le Moana Resort, an IHG Hotel
Exquisite Bora Bora Escape near Matira Beach

1 Night From
\$683
Includes taxes & fees
Per Room

Bora Bora, French Polynesia

Best Price Guarantee + Free Unlimited Date Changes

502-208-1355

For full terms and conditions please go to www.LuxuryEscapes.com. Flights are not included. Images are for illustrative purposes only. Information correct at time of print.



Rand Paul calls school choice a ‘civil rights issue,’ wife says

METRO, 3A

2020 PULITZER PRIZE WINNER

Courier Journal

Louisville, Kentucky

MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 30, 2024 | COURIERJOURNAL.COM PART OF THE USA TODAY NETWORK

Superintendent announces retirement

After 7 years at JCPS, Pollio’s last day is July 1

Krista Johnson
Louisville Courier Journal
USA TODAY NETWORK

Marty Pollio is retiring from Jefferson County Public Schools after seven years leading Kentucky’s largest district, with

a total of 30 years in the system. Pollio, who is one of the longest tenured superintendents of any large urban district in the country, announced his upcoming retirement Friday in an email sent to all district staff. His last day will be July 1, 2025, when his current contract ends. “I began crafting this letter about a month ago,” Pollio said in the email. “It has taken me this long to complete it as I

get emotional every time I return to the letter. I picked this day to send it out to the JCPS family, not anticipating canceling school today. However, it is probably appropriate with all the challenges we have tackled together over the last 7+ years.” In a statement following the announcement, Louisville Mayor Craig Greenberg thanked Pollio “for his tireless service and efforts to improve edu-

cational outcomes for all students. We will continue working closely together for the remainder of his tenure on partnerships to improve public education in Louisville.” Jefferson County Board of Education members will be in charge of deciding who will become the district’s next superintendent, once Pollio’s term ends. See POLLIO, Page 2A

‘Vision 25 years ago is still the same vision’



Classical education emphasizes ancient historical texts and ancient languages, such as Latin. At Highlands, it is merged with Christian ideology.

Highlands Latin School campuses, clockwise from center: Louisville, Ky.; Owensboro, Ky.; Pasadena, Calif.; Greenville, S.C.; Indianapolis, Ind. (West); Indianapolis, Ind. (East); Winter Park, Fla.; Phoenix, Ariz.; Anderson, S.C.; Nashville, Tenn.

USA TODAY NETWORK

How Highlands Latin School built a classical Christian education empire

Josh Wood and Krista Johnson Louisville Courier Journal | USA TODAY NETWORK

The school that would eventually become Louisville’s Highlands Latin began informally with a handful of students learning Latin in their teacher’s living room. ● Parents learned about classes by word of mouth, and the materials came from a nascent homeschooling publishing house that had been initially based in that same living room, before moving to an office above the garage. ● As the number of students grew, the classes moved from Cheryl Lowe’s living room and into rented spaces, before eventually finding a more permanent home as a long-term tenant of the Crescent Hill Baptist Church on Frankfort Avenue in 2002-03.

Today, that campus is one of two in Louisville, where Highlands Latin has more than 700 students enrolled. But its growth didn’t stop there. The school has established other full-time campuses in Indianapolis, Orlando, Fla., and Owensboro, Ky., while 17 part-time Highlands Latin “cottage schools” have appeared in 11 states. Its homeschool publishing house, Memoria Press, is no longer in its garage attic office and today says its books are used by more than 650 schools across the country. And it formed an accreditation body, known as the Classical Latin School As-

sociation, to give a stamp of approval to other classical Christian schools across the country. Today, Highlands Latin has the hallmarks of an empire. A scrappy beginning In school histories shared by Highlands Latin administrators over the years, founder Cheryl Lowe, who died in 2017, did not set out to build an empire. Instead, she turned to homeschooling her two sons after not finding any See HIGHLANDS, Page 12A

Helene leaves destruction in Fla. town

Stunned residents assess the damage

Trevor Hughes
USA TODAY

STEINHATCHEE, Fla. – For nearly two decades, Scott Peters poured his heart and soul into his Crabbie Dad’s bar just across the road from the Steinhatchee River on Florida’s Big Bend coast. He’s weathered storms and floods, the ups and downs of the tourist trade, the overall economy and pretty much anything else the world has thrown at him. And for a long time, hurricanes have been a fact of life – and usually mild enough to ride out in town. Locals threw hurricane parties, cracking open beers and howling defiance at the wind. But after 2016, when Hurricane Hermine trashed the small town he calls home, they started taking the storms more seriously. “We’re basically at sea level,” Peters said Wednesday. That was before Hurricane Helene roared ashore pushing a wall of water. Helene’s eye hit the coast a few miles away, and Steinhatchee got hit maybe harder than almost anywhere else. And Peters’ bar maybe got hit the hardest. He rode out the storm in Gainesville, about 70 miles away, and hadn’t yet made it home to assess the damage. His friends and neighbors texted him photos and videos of the bar, but he worried the small bridge to his house was gone, and maybe the house itself. “It’s total devastation,” he said by phone Friday, while sheriff’s deputies blocked entry to the town. “I’ve got to

See HELENE, Page 2A



The wreckage of the Crabbie Dad’s bar is seen Friday in Steinhatchee, Fla., following the passage of Hurricane Helene. TREVOR HUGHES/USA TODAY



Highlands

Continued from Page 1A

local schools that fit her needs. According to Memoria Press curriculum director Tanya Charlton, Lowe pulled her sons out of a local private school when she realized “they weren’t being educated” and began looking into education herself.

“She researched education and finally came to the conclusion that there was only one true education, and that was the classical education,” Charlton said in a 2021 podcast. “Once she came to that conclusion, that was it for her. To me, that was a pivotal moment in her life. So, she started teaching herself Latin, taught her children Latin, and then decided everybody needs to be classically educated.”

Classical education emphasizes ancient historical texts and ancient languages, such as Latin. At Highlands, it is merged with Christian ideology.

Soon, homeschool parents began asking Lowe to teach their children Latin in her home, and she filled her living room with wooden desks.

Lowe eventually decided to form an actual school. And to get it off the ground, she turned to those close to her.

To lead the school, which was formally founded in 2000, Lowe selected Shawn Wheatley, a college friend of her son who was in his mid-20s when he became principal. According to a Memoria Press article by Leigh Lowe, her mother-in-law had decided Wheatley — who continues to lead Highlands Latin in Louisville — was the right person for the job when he was just 23, two years before he was actually hired.

Cheryl Lowe selected Leigh Lowe, who had a degree in business, to teach Latin, classical studies and Christian studies in a weekly four-hour class made up of students spanning second through eighth grade.

“This was a real leap of faith for both of us. For many reasons, but not least of which was I did not know Latin, or Greek mythology or Roman history at that time. But nonetheless, I quit my full-time job and took a four-hour-a-week teaching position,” Leigh Lowe said in a 2019 speech.

She said her future-mother-in-law preferred her inexperience as “she just had to train me, and not retrain me.”

Today, Leigh Lowe is Highlands Latin



School’s curriculum director.

Charlton, another early teacher, came on board after her children attended classes held by Cheryl Lowe. She had a degree in English and had worked in accounting, but didn’t know anything about classical education until she met Lowe.

“She came to me with this stack of books and said, ‘by the way, we’ve never had a fifth grade before, so we don’t have a curriculum. But I’ve chosen the books — here, you’re going to have to write it this summer,’” she recalled of her start at Highlands Latin during a seminar at a 2022 homeschool teaching conference hosted by Highlands Latin.

“She did that to everyone,” Leigh Lowe said during that seminar. “I remember sitting in my lawn chair in my backyard writing the guides for the books that I was supposed to teach.”

Highlands Latin’s meteoric growth from a bare-bones, part-time school to the empire it is today is presented as accidental.

“I would say Memoria Press was never an empire-building sort of business,” said Leigh Lowe at the homeschool teaching conference, adding that as a result of Cheryl Lowe’s “sincerity, and that humility and that wisdom” parents kept asking them to expand more and more, from a cottage school, to a full-time school to franchises across the nation.

Highlands Latin School campus on Shelbyville Road in Louisville. MICHAEL CLEVINGER AND SAM UPSHAW/COURIER JOURNAL

Highlands Latin’s meteoric growth from a bare-bones, part-time school to the empire it is today is presented as accidental.

“That’s always what has happened because it’s a good thing that people want. And classical education is satisfying hearts’ desires. And so that is, I think, the impetus for growth,” she said.

Decades later, Cheryl Lowe’s legacy continues to live on at Highlands Latin.

“Her vision 25 years ago is still the same vision. It hasn’t changed. I mean, she was just brilliant. We’re using the same books... We just haven’t veered from it,” said Charlton at that 2022 conference.

To preserve independence over the curriculum, Leigh Lowe said that same year, HLS did not have a board of directors.

After The Courier Journal reached out to Memoria and HLS staff for comment, and mentioned the past teaching conferences, videos of the events disappeared from Memoria Press’ website. Staff lists for Memoria Press, its online academy and HLS were also removed.

The empire today

More than two decades after it was founded, the Highlands Latin-Memoria empire is nearly unrecognizable.

Today, Highlands Latin has schools stretching from coast to coast, from the shadow of the San Gabriel Mountains in southern California to the edge of

Continued on next page



THERE’S A DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE BENEFICIAL ONES AND THE DANGEROUS ONES. TRUST AN EXPERT THAT PROTECTS YOU WHILE RESPECTING NATURE.



\$50 OFF

New Healthy Home Maintenance Program

Mention This Newspaper Ad to receive \$50 OFF

HEALTHY HOME MAINTENANCE PROGRAM PEST COVERAGE
ANTS • COCKROACHES • EARWIGS • CENTIPEDES • MILLIPEDES • PILLBUGS • SILVERFISH • SPIDERS • RATS
MICE • ASIAN BEETLES • BOXELDER BUGS • STINGING INSECTS • STINK BUGS • FLIES • PANTRY PESTS

YOUR HOME IS PROTECTED 365 DAYS A YEAR
ASK US ABOUT ADDITIONAL COVERAGE FOR MOSQUITOES AND TICKS, TERMITES, AND BED BUGS.

GUARANTEED!

FRANKLIN
PEST SOLUTIONS

Protecting health, homes, businesses and the environment since 1929

502.586.2119


Scan for a free quote





Decorate with Holiday Magic!

(Tree Not Included)

Every crate includes two boxes filled with OVER 100 ornaments and decorations!

Order Today & Receive Your Crate for **Only \$395**



ROCKWALL CHRISTMAS CO.
ROSE OF THE ORIGINAL CHRISTMAS CRATE
FAMILY OWNED AND OPERATED

(Tree Not Included)

LIMITED TIME OFFER!
INDIVIDUALLY PURCHASED, THE ITEMS IN EACH CRATE, WOULD COST \$1,000+
Designed and made exclusively by the Rockwall Christmas Co.

CALL NOW! OFFER EXPIRES IN 7 DAYS!
PLUS: Use Code USATODAY and get an **EXTRA \$25 OFF!**
888-969-6643



Leigh Lowe teaches students at Highlands Latin School a Christmas song in Latin, in this photo from 2005. MICHAEL CLEVINGER/COURIER JOURNAL

Continued from previous page

Montana’s rugged badlands and the coastal South Carolina Lowcountry.

Most are part-time schools housed in churches. But others are more deeply entrenched.

In Louisville, Highlands Latin opened a second campus on a 20-acre Shelbyville Road property the school purchased for \$3.8 million in 2010.

North of Indianapolis, Highlands Latin is looking to open a permanent campus on a 30-acre plot of land to serve its 200 area students, who currently attend classes in two churches.

Once an over-the-garage operation, Memoria Press today employs about 50 people, according to its website, which also lists international distributors for its books and curriculums in Australia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and Canada.

In addition to publishing textbooks, teacher guides and study guides, Memoria Press runs its own podcast network featuring personalities from the empire talking about classical education and homeschooling.

The accreditation body born out of the empire, the Classical Latin School Association, has accredited 26 schools in 12 states.

“The Classical Latin School Association is a group of elementary and secondary schools that work to promote the culture of the Christian West,” said the association’s director, Paul Schaeffer, in an online promotional video.

Schaeffer, one of Cheryl Lowe’s original students when she was teaching out of her living room, was also, until recently, the headmaster of Memoria Academy, which provides online instruction to nearly 2,000 students spanning grades 3-12.

To obtain accreditation, the Classical Latin School Association requires schools to submit a “self study” to the body and then invite CLSA staff for an on-site visit. Schools wishing to obtain accreditation must pay a \$150 application fee and cover all expenses related to the visit, according to the association’s website. Renewals of accreditation cost \$300 per year for schools with fewer than 100 students and \$600 per year for schools with more than 100 students.

Additionally, more than 100 schools in 31 states are listed as “standard” or “partner” members of the Classical Latin School Association.

The requirements to become a member are far lower than accreditation, with schools having to adhere to the principles of Christian classical education. Partner members pay \$200 to the body, plus \$3 per student yearly; “standard” members pay \$100, plus \$2 per student.

Membership gives schools discounts to annual teaching conferences put on by the Classical Latin School Association and Memoria Press in Louisville, as well as on purchases from Memoria Press. Becoming a “partner” member is also a prerequisite to getting full accreditation.

Memoria College began in 2020, offering master’s degrees in “the great books.”

The college’s provost is Martin Cothran, who designed Memoria Press’ early curriculums alongside Cheryl Lowe and serves as spokesman for the conservative Kentucky Family Foundation lobbying group.

While the college has a conditional license from the Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education, its website says it is not accredited by any agency recognized by the U.S. Department of Education.

As of July, the program had graduated 16 students.

Education just one part of Lowe businesses

With a law degree from Vanderbilt in hand, Cheryl Lowe’s son, Brian Lowe, has handled the business side of the Highlands Latin empire.

Today, the components of that empire are just some of the business interests under Brian Lowe and his family in Louisville.

Brian Lowe is the director of Vittitow Refrigeration, a commercial refrigeration company originally started by his grandfather.

Campus Quilt, a company founded by Brian Lowe’s wife, Leigh, turns customers’ old T-shirts into quilts.

Louisville-based developer Trajan is also under Brian Lowe.



In a photo from 2010, Brian Lowe is shown with his mother, Cheryl Lowe, who founded Highlands Latin School. Cheryl Lowe died in 2017. PROVIDED BY KYLENE LLOYD

In 2012, Brian Lowe told Louisville Business First that his family’s businesses at the time — including his education businesses and his brother’s food-service equipment supply company, Prima Supply — employed about 300 people and had annual sales of more than \$35 million.

Since then, more Lowe family businesses have opened.

With strict uniform requirements at Highlands Latin’s campuses in Louisville and across the country, Highlands Uniform, founded by Brian Lowe in 2019, is a one-stop shop for uniforms.

There is little public-facing information available about City Farm LLC, a Louisville-based company founded by Brian Lowe in 2015.

However, records show last year City Farm paid Bellarmine University \$2.5 million to purchase the Boxhill Estate, an early 20th century Glenview mansion overlooking the Ohio River that includes grounds designed by the Olmsted Firm, which also designed New York’s Central Park and Louisville’s Cherokee Park.

Statistics provided by Brian Lowe during a 2020 teaching conference showed HLS’ Louisville campuses doubling their revenue from \$2.3 million in 2011 to \$5.1 million in 2018, a span of just seven years.

Brian Lowe did not respond to repeated interview requests from The Courier Journal. Leigh Lowe, Charlton, Wheatley, Schaeffer and Cothran similarly did not return messages from the newspaper.

‘It should be an option that Kentucky parents can have’

The diversity of the Highlands Latin empire puts it in a unique position if an upcoming ballot measure passes during the November general election in Kentucky.

Amendment 2 would change the state constitution to allow, for the first time, the passage of laws that could divert public tax dollars away from public schools and instead toward private education.

This is an effort of the Republican-majority in the state legislature that is years in the making, though legislators have been unclear what type of law they will pursue if voters approve the constitutional amendment.

For instance, a voucher program could fund scholarships for students interested in attending private schools, like Highlands Latin. And an education savings account program could fund tuition at private schools, and also cover the cost of items associated with private schools, like uniforms. Additionally, an ESA could be used toward homeschooling materials, like textbooks.

Elsewhere in the country, public funds have helped swell the ranks of classical schools like HLS in recent years.

According to a July 2023 report from the Network for Public Education, a group that advocates for public schools, the number of “classical” or what they termed “right-wing sector” charter schools in the United States has grown 90% since 2017.

Now, 29 states — with the potential addition of Kentucky — have laws that allow public money to go toward private education. Private schools that choose to accept voucher money still reserve the right to choose whom they admit.

“They want to take the rights of private entities, but want to take public money to do it, and that’s what I’m afraid about,” said Adam Laats, a professor at New York’s Binghamton University, who is an expert in the history of education and battles over education culture.

Cothran, the Memoria College provost who was instrumental in devising Memoria Press’ early curriculums, has advocated for the passage of the amendment as the spokesman and senior policy adviser for the conservative Kentucky Family Foundation.

He sees school choice as a way to reform education as a whole by providing competition to low-quality education at public schools and giving parents more options.

“Education has now become the chief battlefield in political fights over race and gender,” he wrote in February, encouraging voters to ratify the constitutional amendment. “And because government bureaucracies inevitably lean left, Christian parents are forced to endure the indignity of not only being forced to endure the indoctrination of their children, but also having to pay for it.”

He added: “Kentucky must move forward by providing families the freedom to choose the best education for their children.”

Asked in a July podcast whether the passage of the ballot measure could see classical education make its way into public schools in Kentucky, Cothran pointed to Great Hearts, an Arizona-based classical charter school chain that now operates dozens of schools across four states with the help of school choice vouchers, but has faced allegations of racism and discrimination.

“This is being done. It has been done. They are very successful. And it should be an option that Kentucky parents can have,” he said.

Reach reporter Josh Wood at jwood@courier-journal.com or on X at [@JWoodJourno](https://twitter.com/JWoodJourno). Reach reporter Krista Johnson at kjohnson3@gannett.com.



NANZ & KRAFT
Your homegrown florist.

502-897-6551 | nanzkraft.com



Louisville, SMU to meet for first time in 40 years

SPORTS, 1B

2020 PULITZER PRIZE WINNER

Courier Journal

Louisville, Kentucky

TUESDAY, OCTOBER 1, 2024 | COURIERJOURNAL.COM

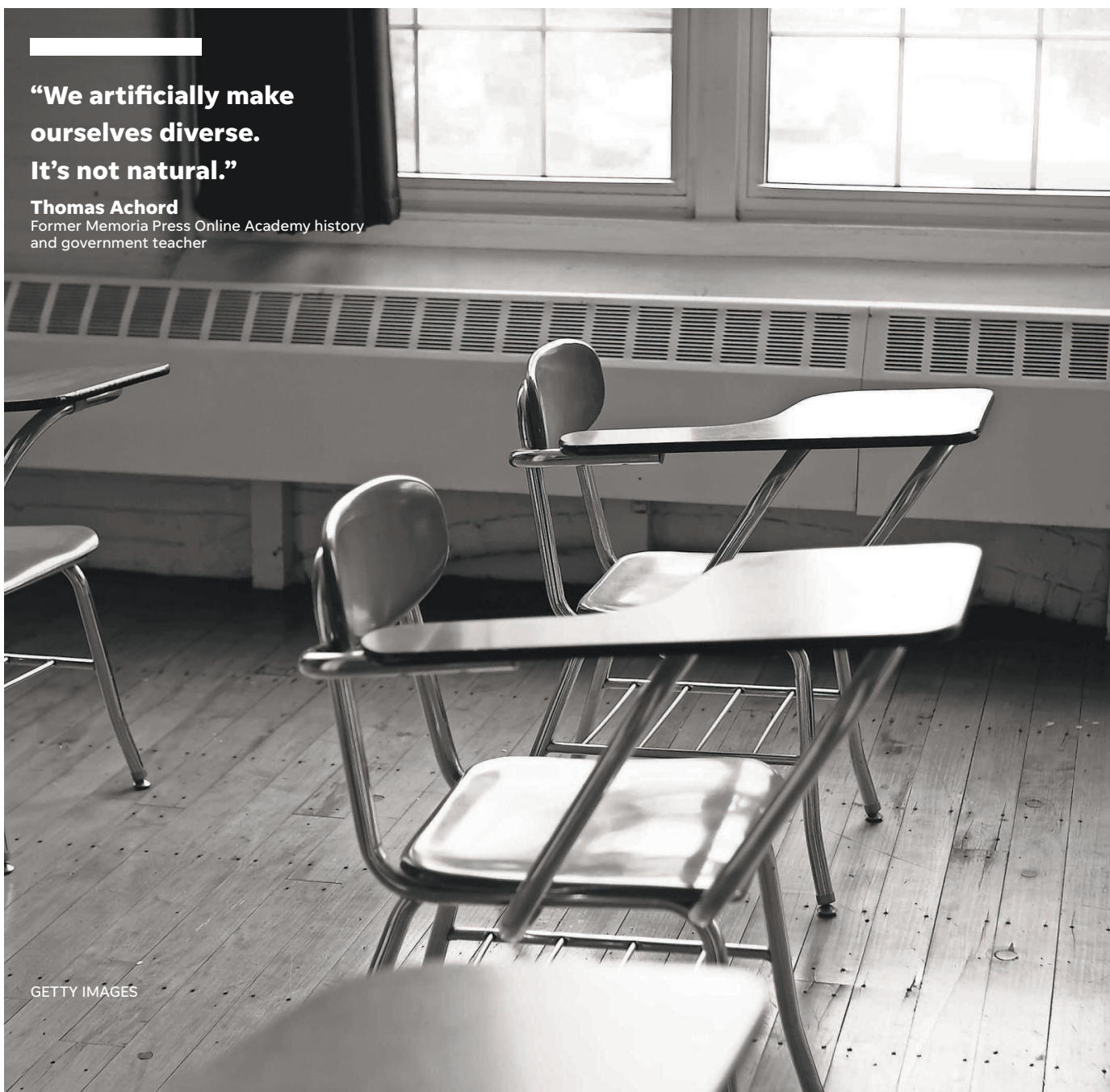
PART OF THE USA TODAY NETWORK

COST OF EMPIRE

‘Saving Western Civilization’

“We artificially make ourselves diverse. It’s not natural.”

Thomas Achord
Former Memoria Press Online Academy history and government teacher



GETTY IMAGES

The far-right appeal of Highlands Latin empire

Josh Wood Louisville Courier Journal | USA TODAY NETWORK

It’s a sunny June afternoon and families are walking along Louisville’s Frankfort Avenue past the imposing, colonnaded façade of the Crescent Hill Baptist Church. ● For the month, there’s a rainbow gay pride planted in front of the church, which also houses a Highlands Latin School campus as a tenant. ● The church’s progressive bona fides are strong. ● It was banished from the Kentucky Southern Baptist Convention for allowing same-sex marriages. ● It has a gay pastor. Its website highlights an inclusive, culturally diverse congregation and efforts to combat racial inequality. ● And in August, the church hosted an author to speak about the dangers Christian nationalism presents to American democracy.

Passersby seeing Highlands Latin’s royal blue sign on the church’s lawn — and knowing little about the school, save for its location and its billboards boasting impressive standardized test scores — might conclude the school, too, is progressive.

But the empire that has sprouted from Highlands Latin — which includes branches across the country, a publishing affiliate, an online academy and an accreditation body — is anything but progressive.

The empire has found a strong appeal to far-right elements and provided a safe harbor for educators with extremist views, including one who advocated using classical

Christian education “to take back the West for white peoples.”

The tagline of the empire’s Memoria Press publishing arm — “Saving Western Civilization one student at a time” — is seen as a dog whistle by some former students and experts.

One of the most influential personalities of the empire is also the spokesman for a conservative Kentucky lobbying group and has been among the most outspoken voices against gay rights in the commonwealth.

See **EMPIRE**, Page 8A



ELECTIONS 2024
VICE PRESIDENTIAL DEBATE

Battle of the ‘Everyman’

Walz-Vance debate likely last chance to score decisive blow

Phillip M. Bailey
USA TODAY

In this exceedingly tight election, Minnesota Gov. Tim Walz and Ohio Sen. JD Vance are serving up one of the most consequential vice presidential debates in U.S. history that could make or break their respective tickets in the final five weeks of the fight for the White House.

The running mates typically host a snoozy undercard, but polls show a seesaw contest in each of the battleground states, and given that Tuesday’s meeting in New York is likely

See **DEBATE**, Page 2A

Pollio criticizes ‘school choice’

Says ballot measure would hurt education

Krista Johnson
Louisville Courier Journal
USA TODAY NETWORK

The leader of Kentucky’s largest school district has a clear message for the commonwealth ahead of the upcoming election: Vote no on Amendment 2.

Jefferson County Public Schools Superintendent Marty Pollio strongly opposes the November ballot measure, which would revise the Kentucky Constitution to let public tax dollars go toward private education.

While proponents say the measure will offer families more choice in how their children receive education, Pollio said a lack of a transparency at private schools, their ability to turn students away and the financial detriment a voucher program could have on public education as reasons he hopes Kentuckians vote against it.

“I don’t think it’s the right thing to do,” Pollio told The Courier Journal. “I think in the end, it will end up damaging the infrastructure of our public schools across this commonwealth, where the vast majority of students go, and I think it will be devastating to our future as a community and a state.”

See **POLLIO**, Page 2A

Subscriber-only eNewspaper

The eNewspaper is an electronic copy of your print newspaper. Enjoy every page by going to courier-journal.com/enewspaper or scan this code on your mobile device. You will also find late news and sports in the bonus sections. Check it out today!



Volume 156 | No. 275
Subscribe 800-866-2211
©2024 \$3.49



0 40901 10706 4

Empire

Continued from Page 1A

And when Kentucky Gov. Andy Beshear ordered schools to move to remote learning amid the COVID-19 pandemic, the classical Christian school joined a lawsuit against him.

“Some of these types of schools are really into trying to separate away from everything to be their own superior society,” said Adam Laats, a professor at New York’s Binghamton University, who is an expert in the history of education and battles over education culture. “Others are culture warriors in mainstream society.”

Christopher Jones, the chair of the Crescent Hill Baptist Church council, did not comment directly on the relationship with Highlands Latin School, saying only that HLS has been a tenant for 22 years and the church “has been a vital part of our community since 1908, and is home to many neighborhood events and organizations.”

Restoring the ‘self-respect of Western Civilization’

It’s a little more than a week before Christmas 2020 when the latest episode of the Ars Politica podcast drops.

Like the dozens of other episodes, it opens with a few bars of Canadian country-folk artist Colter Wall’s soulful 2015 song “Sleeping on the Blacktop.”

Then, the voice of a then-Memoria Press Online Academy history and government teacher, Thomas Achord, is heard.

“Welcome to Ars Politica, a podcast on political life, culture and Christian political theory with Stephen Wolfe and Thomas Achord. We seek to revitalize the Christian West to restore the dignity, strength and self-respect of Western Civilization,” he says before introducing the episode’s topic: Christian nationalism.

“We’ll define it and explain it and then defend it,” he tells listeners.

His co-host, Wolfe, was a former Memoria logic teacher who in 2022 would publish a book titled “The Case for Christian Nationalism.” In that book, Wolfe would call for a “Christian prince” to rule a Christian country, justify violent revolution against the secular state and complain that the United States today is a female-led “gynocracy” where men can achieve success only by deferring to women or becoming effeminate.

During the more than hour-long podcast, Wolfe and Achord discussed how it was the government’s responsibility to preserve “true religion” in the state and how diversity was not “natural” like Christian nationalism was.

“We artificially make ourselves diverse. It’s not natural,” said Achord, who received a master’s degree from Louisville’s Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and later co-authored a book titled “Who is My Neighbor?: An Anthology In Natural Relations.”

He added: “It doesn’t happen naturally. Naturally, if you let people go, over time they all tend to some center. And this is seen in all societies.”

On a pseudonymous Twitter account, Achord was simultaneously making explicitly racist posts railing against diversity and advocating for white supremacy.

Achord’s Twitter account and Wolfe’s later statements — including that Jews would be “tolerated” in a future Christian nationalist America so long as their actions did not undermine the state’s Christian nature — would overshadow their podcast, which has largely been scrubbed from the internet.

But as co-hosts on the podcast for more than two years, Wolfe and Achord would also lay out extreme views.

In Ars Politica’s very first episode, in September 2020, Wolfe said a major theme would be “anti-egalitarianism” — or the idea that people are not equal and do not deserve the same rights, treatment and opportunities.

In another episode, they explored “Anarcho-Tyranny” a term coined by the late high-profile white supremacist Sam Francis that is meant to describe an oppressive system whereby innocent people are criminalized while actual criminals go unpunished.

“I do think the starkest example of Anarcho-Tyranny is the overt anti-white racism that’s permitted in academia, in media, business, government, education — and you contrast it next to the increasing strictures which white people must abide by in order not to appear bigoted,” Achord said in the November 2021 podcast. “...No other people have policed speech like white people do. There are words that white people can’t utter, just whole words, doesn’t matter how you utter them.”

Courier Journal reviews of archived versions of Memoria Press Online Academy webpages show Wolfe was listed as a teacher through at least September 2020 and Achord was listed as a teacher through at least May 2022.



A billboard advertisement for Highlands Latin School is seen on Interstate 71 near Zorn Avenue in Louisville on Dec. 28, 2022. JEFF FAUGHENDER/COURIER JOURNAL

Attempts to reach Achord were unsuccessful. In response to a Courier Journal request for comment, Wolfe emailed a Latin phrase that translates to “a healthy mind in a healthy body.”

Memoria’s online academy’s current headmaster, Mitchell Holley, did not respond to requests for comment. Paul Schaeffer, who headed the online academy from early 2020 until this year, similarly did not respond to requests for comment.

A ‘Trojan horse’ for white nationalism

The March before Ars Politica’s Christian nationalism episode aired, Achord turned to his Twitter account to talk about classical Christian education, which he and other proponents sometimes abbreviate as CCE.

In a short thread, he tied the movement’s goals to white supremacy.

“I am heavily involved in the CCE world,” he wrote. “The people are scared, they’re aware that things are against them as Christians, as Westerners, perhaps they sense things are against them as whites, but they don’t admit it.”

He continued: “My concerns are that, like goodwhites, they’ll be hoodwinked and guilted into tolerating Diversity and nonwhites, Marxism and shillibery. Literally the ONLY organized movement trying to save Western civ is a gang of homeschoolers and private schoolers educating young people... I want to provide formal help, tools, resources for white-advocates to take back the West for white peoples by recovering a classical education.”

In other posts by Achord, he said “Jews” were behind Antifa, called African American Congresswoman Cori Bush, D-Mo., a “ngress” and wrote “we don’t need diversity” next to a picture of white female track and field athletes.

Achord, who was also the headmaster of a classical Christian school in Louisiana while working as a teacher at Memoria’s online academy, would publicly admit the Twitter account was his in late 2022 after it was unmasked by a United Kingdom-based Christian blogger, Alastair Roberts.

In exposing Achord’s anonymous account, Roberts wrote that he noticed similarities between Achord’s burner account and bylined writings and podcasts — particularly how he talked about “anarcho-tyranny.”

Achord initially denied involvement in the Twitter account. But days later, he wrote that he concluded the account was his, but claimed he could not remember the posts or the account from what he called a “spiritually dark time.”

Prominent conservative writer Rod Dreher, whose wife worked at Achord’s school in Louisiana before resigning in protest, wrote Achord was looking to “use Classical Education as a Trojan horse for white nationalism.” Dreher later wrote his son, a student at that school, had told him Achord was trying to lead boys in his class “to the radical racist right,” but he didn’t take his son seriously at the time.

While Achord’s involvement with the Louisiana school has been publicized, his connection to Memoria has not been reported until now.

Memoria still employs some with extreme views

The Ars Politica duo were not the last teachers with controversial views to work at Memoria.

Jared Lovell, who lives in Pennsylvania, is a self-professed monarchist and Christian nationalist who has been at Memoria since at least 2018. He currently teaches classes on U.S. government and history according to the online

academy’s website.

“As a history teacher, I say without qualification, until we get our Civil War history right, we are not going to turn around as a country,” he wrote on Facebook in January. “If you are my student and you say slavery was the cause of the Civil War on the test, you lose points.”

On a list of his “top 10+ American villains” Lovell posted in 2022, Abraham Lincoln was No. 3; on a list of “top 10 heroes in American history” Confederate General Robert E Lee ranked No. 6.

“I echo Thomas Achord: ‘Robert E. Lee was a better man than every current living American,’” he wrote in a September 2021 post.

Over the years, he has repeatedly praised the work of Achord and Wolfe, including Wolfe’s controversial book.

At other times, he took aim at the 19th Amendment, which gave women the right to vote.

“Serious question: can you think of a single social negative that would result from the repeal of the 19th Amendment?” he asked in 2021.

In the comments to that post, he said he was “not anti-women” and knows the question is “not politically correct” before adding that amendments 16 through 20 were “all bad.”

In another post in 2022, he wrote about telling students “at the very least, women’s suffrage assumes a natural antagonistic relationship existing within society and that, for better or worse, it has the effect of splitting households.”

Later in that post, Lovell recalled telling students that “Marxism, Woke-ism” and Critical Race Theory are “all Christian heresies.”

His thoughts on democracy also stray from the mainstream.

“I consider democracy to be the worst form of government overall,” he wrote in 2021. “Monarchy, in my view, fits best with nature.”

Lovell did not respond to requests for comment.

Right-wing appeal closer to home

In Kentucky, the capital of the Highlands Latin empire, the school has appealed to the right, as well.

One of the most influential people in the that empire is Martin Cothran, the co-founder of the Classical Latin School Association, the editor of Memoria Press’ magazine, a former teacher at Highlands Latin and a frequent speaker at Memoria conferences.

He is also the spokesman for The Family Foundation in Kentucky, a conservative Christian non-profit that battled against marriage equality and has more recently been focused on supporting strict abortion bans, banning gender-affirming care for transgender youth and boosting a ballot measure that would allow public funds to be used for private education.

As Kentucky’s gay marriage ban was challenged by the U.S. Supreme Court almost a decade ago, Cothran was a frequent commentator speaking against same-sex marriages.

“The argument that the gay rights issue is a civil rights issue is basically saying that gays are in the same position as Blacks,” he told PBS News Hour in 2015. “...I’m sorry. They were not shipped over here in slave ships. They didn’t have to drink at different drinking fountains. They were not persecuted in the way Blacks have been persecuted. Gays are not politically powerless.”

While gay people should be treated “fairly” he added, that does not “require you to change the definition of marriage.”

Since then, Cothran has continued to go to bat for controversial topics.

In 2022, after the Christian Academy of Louisville faced criticism over an assignment asking students to write a let-

ter to convince gay friends that “homosexuality will not bring them satisfaction,” Cothran defended the assignment.

“To say that a Christian school should be restricted in some way in terms of teaching the Christian children of Christian families at a Christian school what the basic Christian beliefs about sexuality are is, I think, quite frankly a little intolerant,” he told The Courier Journal at the time.

Meanwhile, the Classical Latin School Association, an accreditation body born out of HLS and co-founded by Cothran, has a partnership with the Alliance Defending Freedom, a conservative legal advocacy group that has been involved in a number U.S. Supreme Court cases. The Arizona-based group has opposed LGBTQ rights, backed strict anti-abortion legislation and is considered a hate group by the Southern Poverty Law Center.

Cothran did not respond to requests for comment for The Courier Journal for this story.

‘A thinly veiled dog whistle term for white’

Plastered across the top of Memoria Press’ website, emblazoned on T-shirts and mugs and repeated by staff across the Highlands Latin empire is Memoria’s tagline: “Saving Western Civilization One Student at a Time.”

Writing for Memoria Press in 2017, Cothran wrote “Western civilization is the culture of Athens, the culture of Rome, and the culture of Jerusalem — transformed and perfected by Christianity.”

But the terms “Western” and “Western civilization” have been embraced by members of the far-right in recent years and are viewed, by some, as euphemisms for whiteness.

Former HLS students, as well as experts in Christian nationalism and classical education find the tagline troubling.

“You hear Judeo-Christian or you hear Western, and it is a very thinly veiled dog whistle term for white,” said Josh Davis, an assistant professor of sociology at the University of New Hampshire who studies white Christian nationalism.

Loaded in that tagline, Davis said, was the idea that Americans of “Western” origin had seen their status decline in recent years amid moves toward diversity and inclusivity, and that something must be done to reverse the tide.

Brandon Long, a former teacher at an Ohio classical school that follows the Memoria Press curriculum, saw similar problems with the slogan.

“So, what you see in the tagline of ‘saving Western civilization one [student] a time’ — implicitly in that is a uniform culture that we want to reproduce,” said Long, who is currently running for Kentucky state representative in northern Kentucky’s District 68. “It fills everything. Everything is filtered through that.”

Jessica Hooten Wilson, a professor at Malibu, California’s Christian Pepperdine University and an expert in classical education, is troubled by the tagline as well.

“I would look out for any school that says ‘we’re going to save civilization,’” she said. “Only Jesus Christ saves. So, any school that has their mission to ‘save civilization’ or ‘save children’ — that’s not what classical education should be.”

One former Highlands Latin student who graduated in the 2010s told The Courier Journal the tagline reminded him of the “14 words” — a neo-Nazi slogan — when he first heard it.

“I think they are trying to play on current conservative moral panics. I think they’re trying to market to people who are terrified of public schools,” said the former student who spoke on the condition of anonymity.

Wilson, who leads professional development seminars for classical and Christian schools, said some members of the right look for forms of education they can “misuse” to push an agenda.

“It’s not necessarily that classical education is attractive for the right; I think it’s the fact that you can have a certain kind of education for an agenda,” she said, referencing Nazi and Soviet takeovers of education systems in Germany and the Soviet Union in the 20th century. “When you have control over education, you can make things say what you want them to say. But it’s not the way of education itself that is the problem; it’s the people using it.”

Classical schools, she said, need to be intentional about diversity — including diversity in the curriculum they teach.

“If you’re not being intentional about that, you’re going to end up aligning yourself with white supremacy on accident, or on purpose,” she said.

Reach reporter Josh Wood at jwood@courier-journal.com or on X, formerly known as Twitter at @JWood-Journo. Krista Johnson contributed reporting.