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REACHING OUT

Three diverse Masses serve the parishioners at St. Therese Little Flower Catholic Church.

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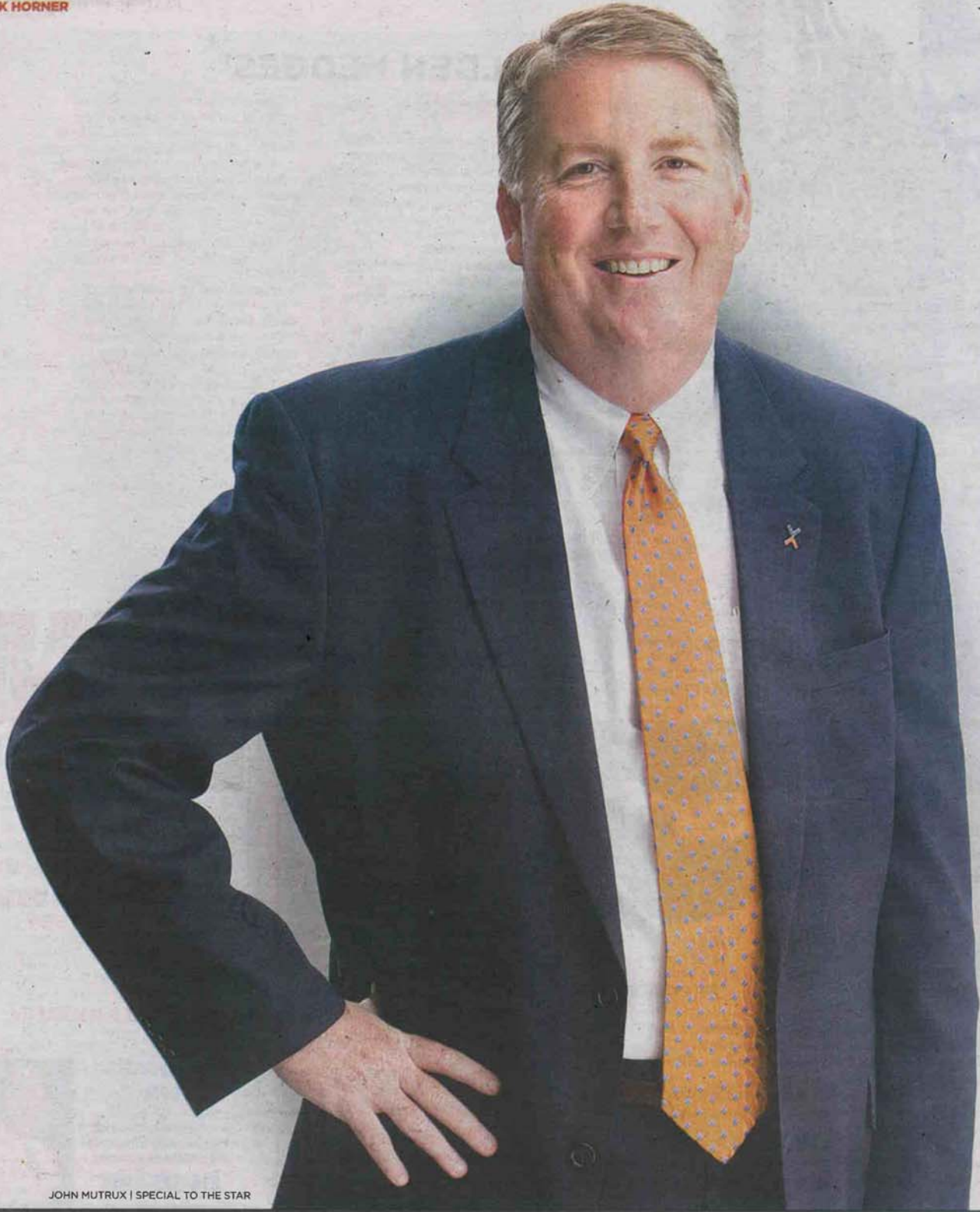
Architect Kirk Horner on building greener schools.

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KIRK HORNER



JOHN MUTRUX | SPECIAL TO THE STAR

SUSTAINABLE SCHOOLS TEACH VALUABLE LESSONS

Architect Kirk Horner, partner at Hollis + Miller, www.hollis-miller.com, has worked on several schools that have received or are in the process of obtaining LEED silver certification, including Staley High School in the North Kansas City School District and Raymore-Peculiar Middle School. LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) is a set of standards developed by the U.S. Green Building Council. There are four levels of certification: basic, silver, gold and platinum, the highest. This conversation took place in Horner's glass-walled, second-floor corner office near Interstate 435 and Antioch Road.

You are currently working on an elementary school called Bell Prairie in the North Kansas City School District. Is that a new school?

Yes. There was an original Bell Prairie, which was a one-room schoolhouse. It will be the first LEED silver elementary school in the metro area and pretty much in the Midwest. It opens this summer.

You drive past and you see a windmill and a cistern that collects all the water. You're going to see plants growing on the roof. Large overhangs, a lot of glazing (glass). You know when you drive up something different is going on here.

Sustainable has become the buzzword to replace green. Everything was green, now everything is sustainable. What does sustainable really mean?

Every day we have choices, how we live, in our case how we design buildings. When we make those choices, we are thinking about which choices minimize impact on the Earth.

How do those choices tie in with the word sustainable?

It's an issue of making the choices that over the long haul benefit the occupants, the Earth and the environment.

So it's about long-term thinking, taking the long view.

Yes. It's not like a building is around for a week or two. It's around for 50 years. So the decisions we make early on — whether it's the amount of daylight we introduce into the building or the materials we use to construct it — that has a lot of implications down the road, whether it has to be replaced or maintained.

Whose idea was it to do LEED certification for the three schools?

For Bell Prairie, it was a school board member who works for KCP&L and understood some of the concepts. But at the time, most of the architects in town and the contractors were saying, "Don't do it, you don't need to do it, it's not worth it, it's too expensive." But the NKC district took it on as a way to differentiate themselves from other districts. Blue Valley is building a high school, it will not be LEED-certified. North Kansas City's is. It's a way to attract people to the community.

Now that you've been working with it, how do you feel about LEED? It's contro-

“What better building to make sustainable than a school? Kids will be impacted every day.”

versial because it's a monopoly and some of the guidelines have been challenged, such as granting more points for imported bamboo than native renewable wood.

We got started on this four or five years ago, and I had some doubts early on but the more I've gotten into it, I've seen how it's changed. There used to be just one set of rules, and some of them were counter to good design for schools, but now there's a set of rules just for schools, so they make a lot more sense for what we're doing.

So it's a fluid, changing set of standards.

Yes, and I love the way they do it. When they're thinking about adding a rule they tell us and they shoot it out to members and say, give us some feedback, what do you think? Does this work, not work? People have the opportunity to complain, gripe or support.

Do clients ever resist environmentally friendly design?

Very often we hear, "We can't afford to build green." I always say, "Whoa, there's an awful lot we can do that doesn't cost a thing."

Why is it important to make schools green?

What better building to make sustainable than a school? Kids will be impacted every day from pre-K through 12th grade.

Do you think kids notice the difference?

We integrate the design into the curriculum, and there are signs all over the building explaining how and why features are different. In the elementary school, the signs answer questions like why is indoor air quality important? Well, if you have asthma or allergies, here's why it's important.

Give us another example of a sign in one of the schools.

In Staley, we have a sign in the student commons area that says, "Do you ever wonder why this building is twisted at this angle?" And it explains the sun angles coming in. Above the sinks they are reminded that we save 35 percent on water usage by using this type fixture, so they're reminded every hour, this is how you can live better. They're going to be better citizens for having spent 13 years in these buildings.

Do you think the current trend toward sustainable design will endure?

I think it's funny some people think sustainability is so new and hot, but I'm active in Boy Scouts, and Boy Scouts has a concept called "leave no trace." They've had it for 100 years. It's the same thing. We're trying to design buildings that minimize the impact they make on the environment.

Interview conducted, condensed and edited by Cindy Hoedel, choedel@kcstar.com.