



Babette G. Augustin/Photo editor

Elmira Notre Dame senior Damian Saks plans to turn his skills with people into a career as a clinical psychologist. He plans to attend Alfred University in the fall.

Elmira senior wants to know what's on your mind

By Mike Latona
Staff writer

ELMIRA — At six-feet tall and 260 pounds, he's been one of the most imposing football players in the Southern Tier. And his coach confirms that he plays as tough as he looks.

So Damian Saks' career choice may come as a surprise to outsiders. You don't exactly picture rugged football types becoming clinical psychologists.

But if you talk to the Elmira Notre Dame senior long enough, you realize quickly that Saks' interior matches the size of his exterior.

"A lot of people say to me, 'With your size, you could walk around with an attitude.' But I've never felt I had to be that way," Saks said. "There's a time and place for different kinds of attitudes."

Saks' most prevailing attitude is his dedication to helping others work out their problems. With an extremely upbeat approach and a willingness to listen, he has quickly become a sought-after figure among his peers since moving to Watkins Glen from Allentown, Pa., two years ago.

"Even in grade school, he always had this knack of being able to listen," said his mother, Valerie. "He still gets calls from people in Allentown saying 'Damian, I need you.'"

The problems Saks encounters go well beyond peers

struggling with homework assignments.

"I have a friend who was a rape victim about a year ago," he said. "She felt really dehumanized. There were a lot of tears; she could not accept that her ex-boyfriend could do something like that to her and still say 'I love you.'"

"I just did a lot of listening. Once she got it all out, that's when I stepped in and talked. She felt like she'd been put down to nothing, and my job was to build her back up. I told her, 'You're still a good person; you're very special; you'll always have people who love you.'"

Mike D'Aloisio, head football coach at Notre Dame, relates an incident last fall that speaks of the communication abilities owned by his two-time captain and All-Twin Tiers lineman.

"We had lost a great deal of players from our (1990) state intersectional championship team, and Damian took it upon

himself to call a team meeting and say what it would take to make it back to the championship game," D'Aloisio recalled. "He made a real impression on our younger kids and we finished with a 6-3 record, which I considered to be outstanding because we were so young."

"The kids really look to him as a leader," D'Aloisio continued. "But he commands respect in a way that isn't threatening to other people."

Saks, a recent recipient of the Hands of Christ Award presented by the Diocese of Rochester, has been involved in many other activities at Notre Dame: varsity wrestling and track, Students Against Drunk Driving, and Mental Health Players — a group of Notre Dame students which travels around the Southern Tier and performs skits showing the dangers of alcohol and drug abuse.

A parishioner at St. Mary of

the Lake Church in Watkins Glen, Saks plans on turning his skills with people into a career as a clinical psychologist. He will attend Alfred University in the fall.

"With clinical psychology, I'd be working with people who are disturbed and would have problems deeper than everyday ones," Saks said.

He's even considering working with convicts. "I wonder what makes them go out and rob or kill or mug someone," said Saks. "I'd have to go in with somebody like that and put my feelings aside, and be like a friend of his until I find out what makes him tick."

Saks' interest in psychology was spurred by an introductory course he took on the subject last semester at Notre Dame.

"His potential is still untapped," remarked John Olisky, who teaches psychology at ND. "I don't think he realizes the good he's still capable of doing; it truly remains to be seen."

Although Saks isn't exactly sure what his future holds, he knows what type of work will be most fulfilling.

"As long as I'm working with people, I'm happy. When you help somebody and they do get better, it's the best feeling in the world," he said.

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Student exchange pilot program to start in fall

NEW HAVEN, Conn. (CNS) — A child-to-child exchange program to foster understanding between Native American and white students in South Dakota will start in September with financial help from the Knights of Columbus.

If successful, the pilot program could be imitated elsewhere. South Dakota Bishops Charles J. Chaput of Rapid City and Paul V. Dudley of Sioux Falls have given their

approval to the program.

The project will be organized around South Dakota's 25 Indian schools and white Catholic schools.

The program "holds much promise for fostering better understanding between the two cultures both now and in the future," said Supreme Knight Virgil C. Dechant in a statement from the Knights' international headquarters.