

EMORY PROFILE JACK ZUPKO

Professor promotes joy of intellectual debate

By ANN HARDIE

On career days at DeKalb's Shamrock Middle School, Jack Zupko, 49 years old and packing all of 190 pounds, introduces himself as a middle linebacker for the Atlanta Falcons. The students don't buy it, of course, but their curiosity is piqued by the time the Emory professor comes clean about his real job — philosopher.

"After I get the blank faces, I tell them that philosophy is best understood by doing it," says Zupko, who engages the students in debates on whether 12-year-olds should drive or middle school should be voluntary. "Afterward, I tell them, you have been doing philosophy."

The Canadian with a hearty laugh and big personality has been no less successful in connecting with college students and administrators alike during his 14 years at Emory. Disarmingly down-to-earth for someone expert in the likes of John Buridan, Duns Scotus and other medieval philosophers, Zupko lacked the talent to pursue a career as a professional ice hockey player and now lives vicariously through his 20-year-old son Neil, a standout pitcher for Maryville College in Tennessee.

As fate would have it, Zupko happened upon an introductory philosophy course his freshman year at Ontario's University of Waterloo. "It was love at first sight," he says. And it is a love he enthusiastically has shared with his students. In 2001, Zupko received the Emory Williams Distinguished Teaching Award in the Humanities.

"I like to think I am a good



Jack Zupko is associate professor of philosophy.

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teacher and my students seem to like my courses," Zupko says. "I do try to draw them into the pleasures of intellectual debate."

The back-and-forth is likely to extend to the Clairmont Campus this fall where Zupko will live among the students with his wife Frances as he serves as faculty-in-residence.

Zupko can be very convincing. After being turned down twice, he got the curriculum committee to green light the Catholic Studies minor that he now directs for Emory College — the only such minor in the country at a non-Catholic institution.

Zupko stressed that Catholic Studies is not about winning converts. "It is sim-

ply about the academic study of Roman Catholicism and the Catholic intellectual tradition and its contribution to Western civilization," he explains. "I am worried about the tradition vanishing. It is worth saving. It is worth talking about."

To be sure, Roman Catholicism has always been big part of Zupko's life. As a very young boy growing up in Kitchener, Ontario, he played "Mass" by converting the coffee table into a makeshift altar and candy dish into a chalice. "Even then I wanted to be Pope," he laughs.

As such, Zupko undoubtedly would shake things up since many of his beliefs on issues ranging from homo-

sexuality to the ordination of women run counter to official church teaching. In an article published May 17 in the Atlanta Journal-Constitution, Zupko defended the University of Notre Dame's decision to invite Barack Obama to give the commencement address despite vocal protests of the president's support of abortion rights and stem cell research.

Even so, Zupko continues to attend Mass at Cannon Chapel. "You can work for justice inside the Church," he says. Then, too, he is not one to presume to have all the answers. He likes to paraphrase St. Augustine in saying, "We are all but poor sinners struggling on our way to the homeland."