

Elementary school counselor redefines educational role

By Emily Morrison

When Sister Kathleen Ward resigned her position as principal of St. Cecilia's School last spring, after a decade of dedicated service, she entered the job market with the most valuable letter of recommendation a professional educator could hope for.

"Dear Sister," wrote Stacy, an eight-year-old student of the East Irondequoit elementary school, "I hate to see you leave but if you have to okay. You really did a great job taking care of everybody, and fixing other people's problems. Once you leave I am really going to miss you. I sure wish you did not have to leave."

The bulletin board outside Sister Kathleen's office was festooned with dozens of such touching missives from the children whose lives Sister Kathleen had affected in some barely tangible yet appreciable way. Even though a plethora of supervisory duties, disciplinary responsibilities, and incessant paperwork constituted much of her administrative role, Sister Kathleen somehow found the time and energy to add a good measure of her first career choice, counseling, to her recipe for professional success.

Sister Kathleen had not become a school principal entirely by choice. "I was getting my master's degree in counseling from the University of Dayton," she begins. "In the midst of the program, the school needed a principal."

Duty called, and the devout Sister of Mercy obliged. She still managed to fit her studies into the complicated pattern of her professional and religious life, completing her degree in elementary school counseling that same year.

"I've taught for 19 years in the diocese of Rochester, and I've been principal for 10 years at St. Cecilia's," she offers, when questioned about a deliberate career change that has led her to accept a joint appointment as counselor and librarian at St. Louis School in Pittsford. "When I pursued my degree, I knew I wanted to pursue something other than teaching, and I also knew I was committed to Catholic schools and parish life. Counseling would enable me to participate in several branches and remain in education in some way.

"As a Sister of Mercy, my role is one of service and healing," she adds. "At this point in my life, I feel that this is the best way I can reach out to people, to serve and to help."

Come September, Sister Kathleen will finally find respite from the polarities inherent in her dual role, as she sets aside the mantle of her administrative responsibilities. "One of the frustrations of being principal has been wearing two hats," she explains. "I was in charge of discipline and counseling at the same time." While she also felt her effectiveness was thwarted by the limited periods of time she was able to devote to working with troubled children and their parents, she marvels at what she considers her good fortune in finding that the children accepted her as both principal and trusted counselor and friend.

Sister Kathleen's "conversion" is being made with the blessings of both the diocesan education hierarchy and her religious congregation. "There's such a great need for this

type of work that my role has been approved by Sister Edwardine Weaver, superintendent of schools of the Diocese of Rochester, and Sister Jean Marie Kearse, superior general of the Sisters of Mercy. Both have strongly endorsed it and encouraged me to pursue the role," Sister Kathleen points out. "It's taken me about a year to get to this stage of the game."

She believes that her experience in teaching and administration has given her a greater awareness of the essentials of effective counseling in a culture that has been virtually transformed by radically altered social mores. "I've seen the change in society. I've seen the change in families," she affirms. "I started teaching in 1956. I was at St. Thomas the Apostle for nine years, and I never had fewer than 53 children in a class. It was rare that you heard of a family break-up. Most children went home to their mothers, not a babysitter."

From 1965 to 1974, Sister Kathleen taught at St. Salome's in East Irondequoit. "Near the end of my nine years, more families were beginning to break up. Still, there was a stability in most families. The fathers, for the most part, were working, and the mothers were staying home."

Four years before the end of her tenure at St. Salome's, Sister Kathleen made a rather unusual gesture toward the families of her approximately 35 students. "I sent a note to the parents, offering to walk children home," she recalls. "Within two days, every single parent responded." For the next four years, Sister Kathleen walked home with a different child each day of the month. Mothers who were not part of the labor force considered a visit from a sister still wearing the long habit to be a special and somewhat mystical occasion. Still, Sister Kathleen found her "house calls" to be homey and touching; milk and cookies were the standard fare offered the honored guest, and laughter abounded.

During the school term of 1974-75, Sister Kathleen taught at Holy Cross while serving her counseling internship under Father Robert Werth at St. Joseph's Villa. "That gave me great insight into the need for counseling," she says. "The kids there are very severely upset." One third-grader, she relates, had seen his father kill another man. "I asked him if he was going home for Thanksgiving, and he said, 'Would you call going to a volunteer going home?' The father was in jail, and the boy was so upset he couldn't live with his mother." He was so traumatized by what he'd seen, says Sister Kathleen, that he wasn't able to sit still in a chair.

The widespread marital turmoil of the '80s, she finds, has stricken a delicate balance between the apparent "normalcy" of an earlier time and the pathological extremes she witnessed during her internship. "I would say the past five years have been the most dramatic in terms of seeing the changes in children's families," Sister Kathleen observes. No longer is there such a stigma attached to divorce or single parenthood. Parents often ask her to be mindful of the effects of separation and divorce on their children's daily lives. On occasion, she has even been asked by wary mothers to be on



Jeff Goulding/Courier-Journal
Christie Ann McVeigh, left, and Kelly Ann McVeigh, right, talk things over with Sister Kathleen Ward, who has accepted an appointment as counselor and librarian at St. Louis School.

the lookout for non-custodial fathers who might attempt to abduct their children from the playground.

Other students in need of counseling include adopted children, who seem to have trouble accepting the fact that they don't live with their biological parents; and children who suffer from neurological imbalances. Parents of such children, she finds, are much more receptive to the recommendations of counselors and physicians than in past decades. "This is a whole new opening for such a child," says Sister Kathleen. "Years ago, if you had suggested medication, the parent would have hit the ceiling."

The most common difficulties she has encountered among fifth and sixth grade students are peer problems. "They feel that other children don't like them, or react when other children call them names," she explains. "Sometimes I go before an entire class and talk to the kids about what it means to be Christian."

Seventh and eighth graders often have problems with feelings of inadequacy, the emotional adjustment of "growing pains," or troubles they bring to school from home. "Smaller children sometimes cry and feel insecure," Sister Kathleen notes. "They are often sent to me by their teachers. What I usually do with the small ones is say that I need a 'helper.'" Children who have trouble adjusting to the demands of the classroom are often only too happy to volunteer to make themselves useful around the principal's office in some small, important way. "I gradually begin to talk to the children, once their confidence has been gained," she adds. "They just want the security of love and acceptance."

Throughout her years as principal, Sister Kathleen continued to get to know her young charges and their families on a personal level. "I get a phone call and I just go," she says, "to visit people who have had sickness and trouble. I feel that my role is different (from that of a secular counselor), being a sister. Mine is not an eight-to-five job. I had my silver jubilee three years ago, and the kids gave me a bike. I often stop at houses to visit. So I'm used to walking neighborhoods, being invited to picnics ... riding my bike at night."

In her combined role this school year as counselor and librarian at St. Louis, Sister Kathleen feels she will be even more accessible to students than she was as principal at St. Cecilia's. "Every single child will see me one day a week," she explains. "I'll read to the little children, and the older ones will take books out and do research. The advantage will be that I won't be a stranger to them, or an authoritarian figure. I feel that, for a sister, this is probably a really good combination. If the children didn't know who I was, they might be afraid to come to me for counseling. I'm a firm believer that the more negative you are with children, the more negative they become. If you can think of one positive approach, it can work wonders."

The most valuable lesson Sister Kathleen learned during her studies at Dayton was the fine art of listening. "Often children don't really want someone to tell them what to do," she asserts. "They just want someone to listen. And listening takes time."

With the sudden gift of an abundance of time on her hands, Sister Kathleen Ward may well find the grace to work a few of those small but vital miracles the helping professions have often been known to inspire.

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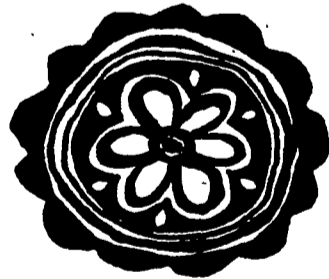
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