

Corpus Christi

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entraps the children of many low-income families. "We're trying to give our children the power to choose a positive direction for their lives," she explained. "We tell them, 'Where you go depends on what you've learned.'"

Corpus Christi has likewise empowered many parents, by offering them a chance to take some positive action instead of standing helplessly by as the city's Catholic schools closed one by one. "We had fighters here," Sister Daly said. "When people told them it couldn't be done, they said, 'You watch.'"

Among those fighters were Felix and Natalia Medero, who enrolled their children at Corpus Christi after Our Lady of Mount Carmel School closed in 1975. "All the Catholic schools around here were closing," Natalia Medero recalled. "I always wanted my kids to stay at one school, and I wanted to stay with a Catholic school."

Throughout the subsequent 10 years, Felix and Natalia Medero have each served multiple terms on the school board, worked at bingo every week, and sweated out the budget year after year — all by choice. "Once the school became parent-run, parents had to do the fund

raising," Natalia Medero recalled. "If you send your kids elsewhere, you don't have to bother with all that. It's a choice and a commitment."

Some parents' involvement with the school lasts even after their children have graduated. The Mederos' youngest son graduated from Corpus Christi this year, yet they plan to continue working at bingo, and recruiting and training new parents.

"There's one guy still working bingo whose son graduated . . . five years ago," Natalia Medero said. "I know another lady whose youngest is in her 20s. These are people who are really just committed to the school; this is their way of giving to the school."

Some of Corpus Christi's most dedicated volunteers are neither parishioners nor parents. Robin Hildreth doesn't have any children of her own at the school, nor is she Catholic. But one day in 1976, while she was living with a Corpus Christi family, she joined the mother in attending a parent-teacher meeting. Today, the children in that family are all grown and the family has moved away, but Hildreth still dedicates most of her waking hours to Corpus Christi School.

"I love it here. There's always so much to be done," she said. "There are other volunteer jobs, but I don't think any place makes you feel as welcome as they do here . . . This is the



Jeff Goulding/Courier-Journal

Corpus Christi students and staff celebrated the end of the school year and the beginning of the school's second decade as an independent, parent-run institution with a talent show on June 16. Above, eighth-graders Rashard Johnson (left) and Bobby Haynes offer their own rendition of a rap song.

only place where people ever opened themselves up to me."

When you're teaching down the hall from a woman who has been a full-time volunteer for 11 years, it's not easy to complain about the pay scale. Corpus' teachers don't seem to fear that they will appear disloyal when they talk and joke about the difficulty of surviving on a Catholic school salary.

Virtually every teacher at Corpus Christi works a second and sometimes a third job to survive. It's a particularly difficult struggle for those who are single.

Catherine Hogan graduated just last year from SUNY Brockport. The day before school started last September, Sister Daly hired her to teach third grade. Hogan supplements her salary from Corpus Christi by working in a Brockport bookstore.

"Can a single person make it on a parochial-school salary? Not in this lifetime or in the next," she said. "Do I wish I didn't have to (work a second job)? Sometimes. Will I be back (at Corpus Christi) next year? You bet!"

Mary Ellen Lansing was also fresh out of college when she came to Corpus Christi more than 11 years ago. She has stayed because she likes the job. But each year, Lansing faces the same dilemma. "I make enough to get by on, but not enough to save," she said. "When things get tight — like you need dental work or your car breaks down — that's when it hurts."

What bothers Lansing even more than hard times is people who presume that if she were a better teacher, she'd be earning more at another school. "I resent that very much . . . when people whose value system is based on money take the attitude that you're paid only what you're worth," she said.

Teachers, volunteers and parents agree that

Corpus Christi School would soon be bankrupt if Sister Daly's worth was expressed in monetary terms. They describe her variously as the driving force and the glue that holds the school community together. "Sister Eileen has it all down," Hildreth said. "If she had not become a nun, she would have been a mother to 200 children."

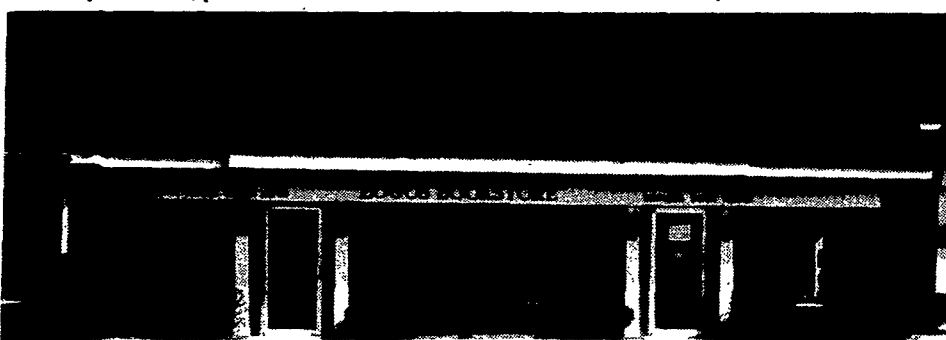
"She can go to a meeting and hold that meeting together, and then she can turn around 10 minutes later and talk to a child," Hildreth said. "I can't say we have a dream here. I'd say we have a reality, but she works with it so well it feels like a dream . . . There's always a way that the Lord steps in."

Hildreth's claim is corroborated by a growing body of legends about divine intervention at Corpus Christi. On occasions when the school has been robbed of its equipment, donations turn up. When a class needs expensive books, a teacher finds them at a bargain price. The school chronically runs short of paper, but each time the critical point approaches, a new supply seems to arrive. After one newspaper article about the school was published, a woman sent a \$5,000 check — just in time to meet the payroll.

"Sister Eileen always seems to be in the right place at the right time," Hildreth said. "And if it's not her, it's a teacher or an alumnus that comes through."

There was the Buffalo truck driver, for instance, who left a donation as well as a delivery at the school from which he graduated years before.

"I sit at some of these meetings and I don't know how we're still here," Hildreth said. "Then I look at the faces of Sister Eileen and some of these other people, and I know why we're here."



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