



Bonnie Trafelet/Courier-Journal

Sister Mary Walter Hickey takes time out to chat with maintenance man Guy Dailey.

Elmira principal ignites pride in students, parents

By Richard A. Kiley

It didn't take long for Sister Mary Walter Hickey, RSM, to confront adversity when she came to Elmira from Rochester back in June of 1972.

Her arrival in the Southern Tier to become Elmira Notre Dame's new assistant principal was preceded one week earlier by the devastating flood. And although the ravaging waters have long since receded, Sister Hickey is still going strong, having weathered that storm and a few others in her 13-year tenure as principal of the Catholic high school.

"I remember arriving just a week after the flood, and the school was being used for a distribution center," Sister Hickey recalled. "A lot of homes were destroyed — especially on the south side — but there was really a good spirit of cooperation."

The flood not only pushed graduation back to mid-July that year, Sister Hickey added, but also delayed the start of her more "routine" duties as assistant principal. "I was really anxious to get going," Sister Hickey said.

The effects of the inclement weather, however, lingered on for months afterward.

"Things did settle down, but it took a long time ... all of that year in fact," said Sister Hickey, who was a history, theology and math teacher at Our Lady of Mercy High School — where she was also moderator of the Student Council — for 12 years before coming to Notre Dame. "I was teaching a class and you could see the anxiety in their faces when we had some more heavy rain that year."

Sister Hickey became principal of Notre Dame in the fall of 1975, and she admits that those early days prepared her for the trials and tribulations of being a high school principal amid days of declining enrollments and changing social values in a city trying to rebound from economic hard times.

"Notre Dame had some very good years (with its enrollment) in the '70s; we had some 600 youngsters then," said Sister Hickey, who

entered the congregation after graduating from Our Lady of Mercy High School in 1953. The opening of the new Southside High School in the late 1970s and the migration of big business out of the city began to take its toll on enrollment.

"A lot of businesses and industries closed down in the 70s, and many industries were leaving Elmira," said Sister Hickey, citing American La France, Ingersoll Rand and Ann Page Foods as examples.

But by increasing the school's goal for its annual appeal and with the inception of such concepts as a field day for prospective Notre Dame students in the fifth and sixth grades — Sister Hickey now believes the school will be able to survive struggling enrollment figures and still provide students with a quality education.

"The increase in the goal for the annual appeal has helped greatly. Five years ago we had a goal of \$30,000. Last year's goal was \$110,000 and we're going for \$130,000 this year," said Sister Hickey, who estimated the school's current enrollment at around 340.

The annual auction at the school — an effort involving students, parents and faculty — raised \$10,000 last year as well.

"Our tuition (\$1,445) is one of the lowest in the diocese and that's a credit to the parents," Sister Hickey said. "They want us to be affordable. They are very proud of the school!"

Students who qualify can also work at the school during the summer to help pay for their tuition. "It's just part of our tradition. We've got wonderful and caring kids here," said Sister Hickey, who was a member of the first graduating class at Rochester's Our Lady of Lourdes grammar school in 1949. "The parents' support we've experienced here is like none other I've seen anywhere."

That support has not been just monetary, either. Some alumni of Notre Dame, like Chemung County Deputy Tom Argetsinger for

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