

## Feature

# Junior-high teacher makes the world her classroom

By Teresa A. Parsons

Patricia Heney is the kind of teacher who could almost convince you to endure junior high school all over again.

Twenty-four years of teaching has not cooled her passion for history as a living discipline. At 48, she has participated in half the period she covers in her 20th-century American history classes. What's left she brings to life by weaving facts and dates together with her own pictures and stories, collected on dozens of summer expeditions to countries all over the world.

When eighth-graders at St. Theodore's in Rochester study the Treaty of Versailles, they see Heney's pictures of the Hall of Mirrors at the Palace of Versailles, where the treaty was signed. Lessons about World War II are illustrated with pictures, items and personal observations Heney has gathered during visits to German concentration camps and Normandy's beaches. Tales of traveling with the Freedom Riders through hostile Southern towns punctuate her coverage of the civil-rights movement.

"Sometimes students will say, 'We really are lucky. We never learn about any place you haven't been,'" she said.

Heney confirms that there aren't many such places. A native of Long Island, she taught English for the Peace Corps in Thailand from 1961-63, then counseled drug addicts in Harlem, and worked briefly as a researcher at the United Nations before finding her niche as a teacher, first in a New York City-area Catholic school, and later in Rochester.

She spent three years at St. Andrew's before moving to St. Theodore's in 1972. She has stayed, in spite of the financial sacrifice Catholic school salaries impose, because "I haven't had any reason to leave.

"The values (Catholic schools) have always stressed are important to me," she explained. "And I'm not materialistic. I just want enough to live on and travel — clothes and possessions aren't important to me.

"Growing up I always thought, 'If you're going to do something, you have to do your best or find something else,'" she recalled. "I tried a lot of things, and I wasn't afraid to get out if I thought I was going to be mediocre ... Nothing else ever had the appeal teaching has had for me."

Yet Heney has never confined her profession to a classroom any more than she has relegated history to what happened in the past. Determined to take part in shaping events she would later teach, she protested against the Vietnam War and for civil rights, and worked for a summer in the U.S. House of Representatives.

Most summers she has spent traveling, but not on the tour-group circuit. Instead, she strikes out on her own, looking for ordinary people and "a real idea of what things are like."

Her first-person observations often dispel stereotypes — including the notion that life in communist-run countries is universally drab and depressing. "You get the idea that all these people are unhappy, but they're not. It's not this grim, dismal, we're-about-to-break-out kind of thing," she said.

On the other hand, she found life in India and other Third-World nations "very grim" in spite of what are sometimes rich and ancient cultures. "The poverty, the street life you see there is very depressing," she said.

Among her favorite places are Paris, where she's soaked up the "beauty, culture and food" 15 times or more, and Japan, which she visited for the first time last summer. "I loved it — it's immaculate, quiet, polite," she said. "You could eat off the floor in their subways."

Virtually the only places she hasn't enjoyed are Middle-Eastern countries, where she found attitudes toward women to be threatening. "The men follow after you in the streets, grabbing your arm and calling out at you," she explained.

Although Heney describes 20th-century American history as her specialty, her keenest interests are the Holocaust and the Vietnam War — topics she introduced to her students long before either was included in the standard Catholic-school curriculum.

Her favorite age group — and the only one she has ever chosen to teach — is seventh- and eighth-graders. "I love the age. They're young enough that I can be teaching them new things ... (but) they're old enough to be interesting to me," she explained. "They're so capable, and I try to push them to be everything they can be."

Discipline is often the downside of teaching at

the junior-high level, but Heney learned to overcome that problem with her very first class of 57 eighth-grade boys. She began school's opening day by giving the class a quiz and warning them not to talk. "Someone sneezed, and someone else said, 'God bless you.' I said 'You have detention,'" she recalled with a smile. "I was a witch. I don't know why they liked me, but they did."



Linda Dow Hayes/Courier-Journal

**Tales of travel and life experience enrich Patricia Heney's American history classes at St. Theodore's School.**

"Being popular really isn't important to me, but I couldn't teach if I didn't think (students) respected me," she added. "I think kids want to trust you. They want to know that what you say, you mean. They may not like it, but they respect it and trust it."

Heney still maintains strict standards for behavior in her class, but finds that once she has established her expectations, the material she teaches commands students' attention. "I start immediately (when class begins), and I stop at the end," she explained. "They like to learn and I love to teach, and I think that makes a difference."

Such was the case with 23-year-old Christopher Menna, who left St. Theodore's 10 years ago, yet still remembers laughing at Heney's stories and agonizing over her tests. "I always found her very demanding," he recalled. "Just

about any other social studies test I ever took after that was easy."

Heney appreciates hearing from former students whom she prepared well for future studies. But she winces when students complain that those later classes are less in-depth than what she covered in eighth grade. "There's a momentary feeling of being flattered, but then I'm sad," she said.

She is also dismayed by some of the changes she's observed in students during her 24 years of teaching. Responsible students who are eager to learn still come along, but less often. Attention spans, she believes, tend to be shorter and work habits poorer. "Kids used to feel that school was their number-one job," Heney explained. "Now I get the feeling that a lot more kids almost think school is an intrusion."

She attributes the change, at least in part, to parents trying to handle "too many full-time jobs," and thus unable to remain closely involved in their children's schoolwork.

"There's much more parenting and counseling involved in teaching now, and it becomes more difficult every year," she explained. "Parents seem more burdened ... they are just not up to all of the follow up."

As teaching grows more complex, Heney protects herself from burnout and boredom by adhering to a personal vow. She reads one or two new books about each topic she teaches during the year — a task that amounts to 60-some books a year. "If you're committed to making your subject interesting, you really have to put in the time and effort," she explained. "The one thing I never wanted to be is stale ... I'm not going to be one of those teachers that's dead wood because they've taught something for so long."

What probably best prevents Heney from burning out, however, is her conviction that she touches and changes the lives of students — not all, but many. "I think you really do make a difference. I get letters from high school and college students that say, 'I still love history,'" she said.

Not all her praises come from former students. Shortly after Christmas, a girl currently in one of Heney's classes wrote: "Thank you for making me a better person every day in your class."

## Students become journalists

By Rob Cullivan

SPENCERPORT — Newspaper readers looking for a break from headlines that announce terrorism, toxic waste and a host of ills in-between may be attracted to two newspapers recently published by diocesan elementary school students.

For example, theologians debating God's creative abilities could do well to consult the December 1, 1988, issue of *The Monthly Noise*, St. John the Evangelist School's newspaper. Inside, a survey of kindergarten students reveals that, among other things, God is the creator of plastic.

The student credited with the above-mentioned response, Derek Wischmeyer, was one of 16 kindergarteners who answered Kathy Cammilleri's question, "What does God do for you?" The survey was among several ideas Cammilleri used to interest the school's students in creating *The Monthly Noise*.

The idea for a school newspaper originated at a meeting of St. John the Evangelist's Home/School Association early last year, Cammilleri said. A newspaper appealed to association members as an ideal outlet to improve communication between the school, the parish and school parents, she said. The mother of two students volunteered to direct the project.

She began by visiting each school homeroom to drum up articles for the paper, and by placing a box for submissions in the school office. "There were no restrictions on what you could submit," she said. "Anyone who submitted anything would get in."

Just about everything was published, ranging from articles on students traveling to France to jokes and want ads. Cammilleri interviewed students in grades K-2, and designated one student to report on class activities in grades three through eight. She also sent letters to school parents, urging them to submit articles. By November, 1988, enough material had been collected to fill 17 pages.

Stories ranged from the political to the poetic. President Bush's November election landslide was duplicated with even more sorrowful results for Michael Dukakis in the second grade. Mary Daily wrote that Bush was resoundingly victorious with 26 votes to the Massachusetts' governor's two.

Less weighty matters concerned the eighth grade, according to Shannon Mullaly. Most of the class members had decided what high school recruiter's presentation most impressed them, but more importantly, fund-raisers for the class' Cape Cod trip were just starting.

Fund raising also occupied the minds of the school's sixth-graders, who had collected more than \$36 for flood victims in Bangladesh. The class's wider interests were exemplified by Scott Steiger, a Channel 13 weather spotter for Hilton. Steiger had already been mentioned twice on the station's nightly weather reports, Jason Nasella wrote.

Cammilleri is already putting together a second edition of *The Monthly Noise* to be published this spring. Eventually, she wants the paper to live up to its name, coming out monthly in a four- or five-page edition. She credited school parent Vicki Reynolds with typesetting the issue, and noted that the students did all of the work in their free time.

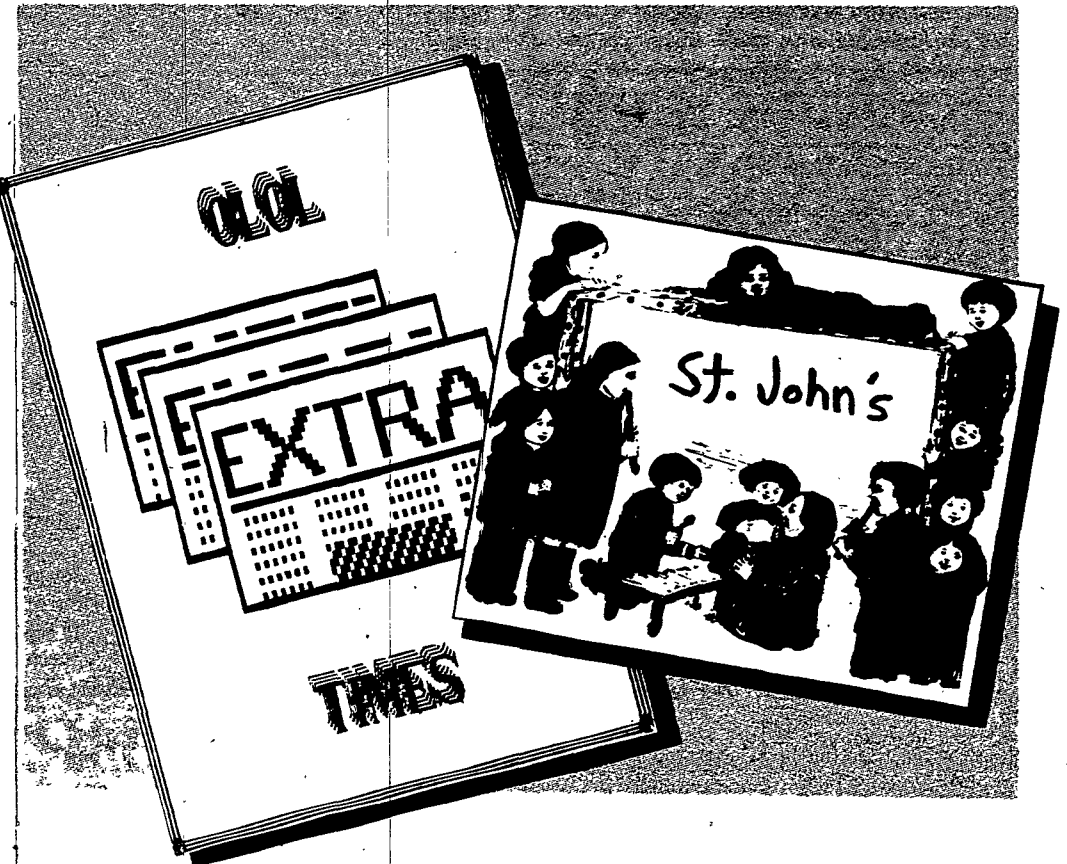
Sixth-graders at Our Lady of Lourdes/Seton Junior High attempted a different approach to the fine art of reporting. About one month ago, Lenore Platteter, one of the school's two sixth-grade teachers, was teaching her class a language arts section on newspapers. The students were studying such sections of the daily paper as sports and classifieds when Platteter suggested they write articles about the school itself.

Not only did the students enthusiastically accept the idea, but seven of them asked Platteter if they could create their own newspaper, an idea she endorsed. By Friday, January 27, their efforts had produced the first edition of the *LOL Times*.

Unlike the *Monthly Noise*, the *LOL Times* focused on features, movie reviews, puzzles and columns, including one with advice for the academically-stricken. Dear Abby, make way for Heidi Brockmyre.

Brockmyre's column, "Dear Heidi," answered one reader's query about how to improve bad grades by advising that balanced studying and a well-balanced diet are the keys to academic success.

Her classmates resoundingly agreed that Brockmyre was the only choice to write the column. "She's helped me solve my problems!" Audrey Marcello exclaimed. Marcello's



own version of advice for the homework-stricken was: If you've forgotten to do your homework, just tell the teacher "a Martian came and took your big brother hostage. He just happened to need a piece of memo paper. So, you had to sacrifice your homework."

Marcello admitted her excuse may not be as convincing as it first sounds. "If I ever said it, I'd turn beet red and embarrassed," she confessed.

Nothing could be more embarrassing than losing one's brain, a malady suffered by one student, according to the paper's classified section. "(If found, please return to the owner, Julie Fisher," the advertisement read.

The paper's staff consists entirely of girls, which may account for its editorial content. Four staff members contributed to an editorial criticizing the school's dress code; in particular, the rule against girls wearing rolled-down socks. "As long as we have the required uniform, why can't we wear it the way we want it

to be worn?" they wrote.

Such matters do not concern the boys in the class. "We don't care," Tundji Akpo-sani said. "We don't have to wear socks up or down."

The paper's fortunes may go up or down, depending on how well its fourth-to-sixth-grade audience receives it. Platteter hopes to issue it quarterly. The students themselves enjoyed the experience enough to want to repeat it. Some of the staff's classmates have their own ambitions in the newspaper world.

"I do comics," Beth-Anne Diodato said. "I like drawing." Platteter commented that some of Diodato's work may turn up in the next issue.

Molly Bayer, who also enjoys drawing comics, especially likes the classifieds in a newspaper. "I think they're fun, the whole idea of putting them together," she said.

Possibly, Bayer can put together a classified advertisement for the next edition that would help Fisher find her lost brain. She could write Dear Heidi for advice on how to do it.

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