

Students, teachers adapt to life after Mooney

By Sean McNamara
Freelance writer

ROCHESTER — Life goes on for Cardinal Mooney students who wondered if they would survive the Greece Catholic high school's closing last year.

Faced with the immediate demands of adjusting to new schools, and looking ahead to the choice of a college or job, few have been able to dwell on their loss.

Some parents and teachers, however, have yet to relinquish their bitterness. Peter Ruggeri, now a senior at Aquinas, believes he adjusted more easily than did his parents, who now refuse to give to the diocese's annual Thanks Giving Appeal. "I thought (the change) would be a lot harder," he said.

The first weeks were most difficult for 454 students who had registered to attend Mooney during the 1989-90 academic year. Approximately 150 transferred to Aquinas Institute, 105 went to the Greece School District and 100 changed to Bishop Kearney High School, according to officials at each school.

Senior Dave Zacks spent a week at Bishop Kearney High School, which actively recruited former Mooney students, then switched to Greece Olympia High School. At Kearney, he said, some former Mooney students got into fights with other students.

"It was like it (Kearney) was trying to be like Mooney, and it couldn't ever be like Mooney," he explained.

Colleen Hamlin, now a senior at Aquinas, didn't believe she was transferring from Mooney until the first day of class. "At first it was really hard," she said. "I wasn't sure I wanted to adjust, but once I got to know more people, it got a lot easier."

"Fitting in" became easier as the year progressed, according to Barbara Jablonski, Kearney's director of development and public relations for the school.

Particularly stressful was Kearney's first pep rally of the year. "It was very sad when it came to the cheer spelling out Kearney," Jablonski said.

Each school helped former Mooney students adjust differently. The Greece school district treated them as any other transfers, guidance counselors said. Nor did Aquinas single out Mooney transfers, except during a special orientation at the beginning of the year, according to Father H.B. Gardner, school principal. "We cannot substitute the Mooney experience for them. It's not possible. What we have tried to do is treat them like any other student. We didn't promise them something we couldn't deliver on," he explained.

"We didn't want to give the impression of being the big bear ready to pounce on



Babette G. Augustin-Staff photographer
A double exposure shows the facade of Cardinal Mooney High School superimposed over one of the school's front doors. Mooney, which closed in June of 1989, will become a middle school for the Greece Central School District.

them," he added, noting that Aquinas did not formally recruit Mooney students.

Kearney offered tours of the school and consultation sessions with students and parents. "There was a real effort to make it as comfortable as possible," said Jablonski of the transition.

Riding past Mooney on the bus, former students are sometimes stung by jibes from classmates. "We (former Mooney students) all got closer the first few weeks. They were all we had," said Olympia senior Victoria Grass. "I really never appreciated it (Mooney) until it wasn't there anymore."

Teachers were less likely to take the school for granted. Some with more than two decades of service at Mooney still feel exiled.

Jo DeGrandis, now an English teacher at Aquinas, feared the new environment. "Sometimes, I see myself as using the adjective 'we,' meaning those of us from Mooney," she said.

Six former Mooney teachers found jobs at Aquinas; three went to Kearney. Among the latter is baseball and basketball coach Ed Nietopski, who taught theology at Mooney for 25 years. Nietopski said his first few weeks at Bishop Kearney "were a little strange, but after that, kids are kids." Shortly before Christmas, former Mooney teachers were sent unexpected

severance pay from the Holy Cross Brothers who ran the school.

Former Mooney math teacher and coach Kevin Ward, now a counselor at Park Ridge Hospital's Chemical Dependency Unit, was grateful for the money, but said, "I'd give it back tomorrow if we could have the school open again."

Sophomore Paul Blandino of Chili, who now attends Kearney along with his brother David, feels the controversy of last spring "is over with. You can't really do anything about it now."

However, his parents, Donald and Peggy Blandino, no longer trust Bishop Matthew H. Clark. "There are still a lot of wounds to heal because of the way it was handled," Peggy Blandino said. "Some parents feel an animosity toward the diocese."

Diocesan spokesman Father George Norton said anger toward the bishop is misdirected. "The bishop did not make the decision to close Cardinal Mooney High School," Father Norton said. "It's time to move on. We have to be concerned with the future."

That future may be difficult for Catholic education in Greece.

Duane Rupert of the Greece Central School District's Community Relations Office said the closing of Mooney has caused a ripple effect, resulting in a lower percentage of students in primary grades attend-

ing parochial schools.

During the 1988-89 school year, school officials said, 20.1 percent of kindergarten students attended schools other than Greece Central, most of them Catholic schools. During the current school year, that percentage dropped to 17.5.

"The impact was greater than we expected," Rupert said. "I was totally overwhelmed by the impact of the closing of a Catholic high school."

By 1995, Rupert explained, Greece will supply 1,000 more students than the district is equipped to handle.

"We would be in serious trouble if parochial education was less of an alternative," Rupert said. "Without a Catholic high school in the community, some parents may have rethought parochial education."

Future projections cannot measure the loss of Mooney for parents, students and teachers. Many compared the school's closing to the death of a good friend, and the adjustment period afterward to grieving.

A petition to rename the Mooney building once it becomes a Greece middle school passed through one of Olympia sophomore Liz Jenner's classes.

"They were going to name it after some dead guy," she said, "and we were the ones who died there."

Nazareth Academy

What are you hoping for in 1990?

TEKNAYA WATSON, sophomore:

The best thing that could happen for me in 1990 is 'life.' I am very blessed to be living. There is nothing better which could happen for me than life itself. As long as I'm alive, all things will be good, and I can be grateful for all I have!



BETH GIBSON, junior:

The best thing that can happen to me in 1990 is for me to have great success in school and to be accepted into the Army Reserves. I've always wanted to be a part of the American Army.



AS TEENS SEE IT

HEATHER KING, junior:

The best thing that could happen to me in 1990 is for the world to change. We have many problems and for the world to simmer down would be great.



HEATHER DALTER, junior:

The best thing that could happen to me is that my grades improve.



HOUSE OF GUITARS

Most New Album and Tape Releases Just \$5.98 & \$6.98
CD's From \$3.98 to \$11.98 Each



MUSIC TRIVIA

This week's question:

Whose first solo hit was "Got to Be There?"

A: _____

Name: _____
Address: _____
City: _____ State: _____
Zip Code: _____
School: _____

Rules:

Each week, the Catholic Courier, in conjunction with the House of Guitars will feature a Music Trivia contest. All you have to do to enter is answer the question, fill in your name and address and the school you attend (if applicable), cut out the coupon and send it in to the Catholic Courier. If more than one correct entry is received, a drawing will be held and one winning entry will be drawn. If yours is the winning entry, you will be mailed a coupon for a free album or tape of your choice redeemable at the House of Guitars, 645 Titus Ave. All entries must be received within seven days of this paper's issue date. Winning names and answers will be printed the week following each drawing.

The Catholic Courier
Music Trivia
1150 Buffalo Rd.
Rochester, NY 14624