

Teacher wants to open students' minds

By Rob Cullivan
Staff writer

ROCHESTER — Last winter, Cory Oleksyn, a seventh-grader at Our Mother of Sorrows School on Latta Road, was interested in creating a science project exploring robotics — the study of the design, manufacture and use of robots.

Needing information on the subject, Oleksyn and his partner, Mark DeNeve, knew exactly whom to turn to — their science teacher, Brian Bonkowski, who teaches grades four through eight.

"We asked him questions, and he figured out the answers," Oleksyn said. "He located books for us."

Those books and answers helped the junior-high duo create an award-winning science project for last spring's Aquinas Institute science fair, which encompassed exhibits from all diocesan junior highs. Entitled "The Anatomy of Robotics," a look at domestic and industrial robots, the project took second place overall.

Oleksyn noted that Bonkowski's teaching ability gets top honors in the hearts and minds of his students.

"They all think he's a great person," Oleksyn said of his instructor. "I'm sure because he handles all our problems quite efficiently."

For 18 years, Bonkowski has been handling problems efficiently — from St. Francis DeSales School in Geneva to Our Mother of Sorrows where he has been on the faculty since 1981.

Bonkowski said he has chosen to stay in the Catholic school system because four elements combined to make teaching in such a setting irresistible.

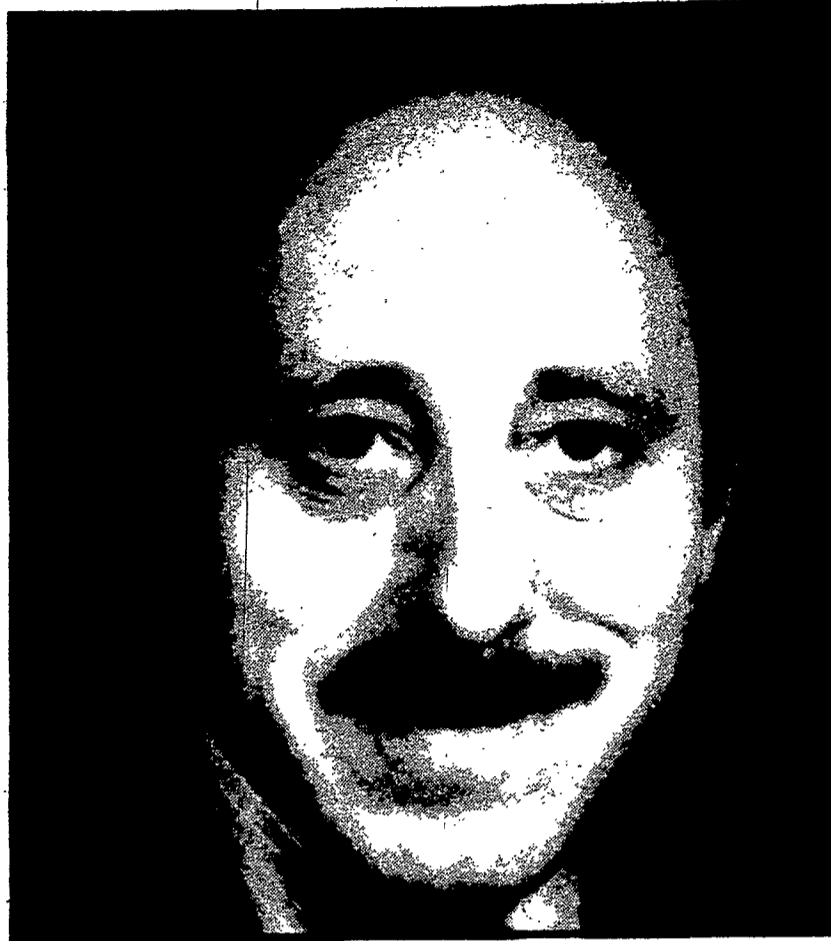
"I think one of the most important things is that (Catholic schools) provide an environment of faith, family, school and church ... to serve the whole child," he said.

"Childhood is a special station in life ...," Bonkowski later added. "They're alive, they're vibrant, their eyes are open."

Keeping those eyes open to the possible learning situations inherent in daily experience excites the teacher to lead his students on cerebral journeys throughout the school year.

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In his science classes, for example, he encourages students to look at commonplace items as signs of technological progress.

"Let's say we're going to talk about machines," he said, explaining that he would turn to the class and ask: "How do you see them in our environment?" In response, "you get a plethora of all kinds of information," Bonkowski continued, pointing out that his students might cite such items as video games and household appliances as examples.

Such an approach allows students to realize "what we're doing outside the school isn't alien to what's here," he said.

This down-to-earth approach marks his religion classes as well.

"One of the most enriching experiences in teaching seventh grade is when I teach church history," Bonkowski said, noting that his charges enjoy hearing about Catholic personalities.

"They really key into what's personal for them," he said, listing Catholic Worker founder Dorothy Day, and St. Francis of Assisi as two of his students' most popular figures in church history.

Explaining the attraction of Day and St. Francis, he said: "I think (the students) see the personal example of struggle between good and evil and the need to make a commitment."

St. Francis, in particular, baffles and impresses the youngsters because of "the fact

that he rejected a life of materialism," Bonkowski said. "Students find that difficult to understand, especially in this day and age."

Indeed, the modern world presents students with complex challenges, and to help students better grasp that fact, Bonkowski will help institute a whole-language program at Our Mother of Sorrows this fall.

The idea behind the whole-language approach, he explained, is to transport students on a global journey through examples of world literature. African and Asian folk tales will take their place beside European lore in the whole-language basket, which Bonkowski hopes the students will

carry into the planet's growing marketplace of ideas.

Bonkowski said that students need to know that "their experience is not so different from others' in world regions," and that reading the literary classics of other cultures can help this understanding take root.

The teacher also stressed the importance of nurturing students' souls. "I think the most important component of (teaching) is not what is taught, but our behavior," he said, recalling how his mother's example inspired him to take up the vocation of teaching.

"I think she was the motivating influence," he said. "The purpose of learning is further learning — that's what she said by her words and actions."

He said his mother spent 15 years going to summer school to get a bachelor's degree, and that she took her family on a European cruise on the famed ship, the Queen Mary, back in the early 1960s. Bonkowski said he could still remember touring various museums in Italy and France and how the experience changed his life.

"We influence as we have been affected," he said, pointing out that his mother's attention has translated into his own teaching attitude.

Oleksyn's comments indicate that this approach has borne fruit. Noting that the teacher has from time to time gone to bat on behalf of students, successfully mediating student disagreements with the school administration, Oleksyn praised Bonkowski.

"I think he's a really great teacher because he helps us individually with our problems, and if we have any problems that are within his jurisdiction, he can do his best to change the rules," the student said.

Catholic Schools Week to emphasize diversity

WASHINGTON, D.C. — "Catholic Schools: A Kaleidoscope of People" will be the theme of Catholic Schools Week 1990-91, which is scheduled for the week of Jan. 27-Feb. 2, 1991.

The annual event was established 16 years ago by the National Catholic Education Association and the United States Catholic Conference as a time for celebrating the contributions Catholic elementary and secondary schools make to the church and the nation.

"The theme ... reflects the rich diversity in Catholic schools today and their success in teaching

students of many ethnic, religious and socio-economic groups," said Father J. Stephen O'Brien, executive director of the department of chief administrators for NCEA.

According to Father O'Brien, the percentage of ethnic minority students has more than doubled in all Catholic schools during the last two decades, from 11 percent in 1970 to 23 percent in 1990.

"African Americans and Hispanic Americans represent the largest segments of that 23 percent, followed by Asian Americans," the priest added.

Another trend is the increase in

non-Catholic enrollment, from 10.6 percent in 1983 to 12.1 percent in 1990.

"Non-Catholic parents who choose Catholic schools for their children cite the importance of a values-added education and a tradition of academic excellence as the basis for their selection," Father O'Brien said.

During the 1980s, both elementary and secondary schools continued to flourish in urban areas, with a small increase in the percentage of suburban locations and a slight decrease in rural areas.

"Of over 8,700 Catholic

schools, 34 percent are in urban areas and 12 percent in inner-city settings — numbers which underscore the strong commitment of Catholic educators to urban America," said the NCEA executive director.

According to the Catholic Schools Week handbook produced by NCEA and USCC, Catholic schools observe the week of Jan. 27 in many ways, ranging from gathering proclamations from governors and mayors, to scheduling lunches for grandparents and ceremonies honoring teachers and students.

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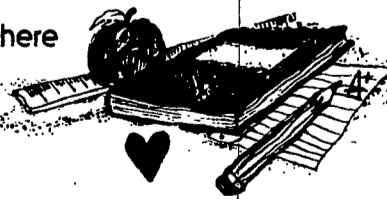
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