

School formed foundation of faith

By Gail Welch
Guest contributor

I am a parent, a grandparent and a lifelong member of St. Mary's Parish in Dansville. Five generations of Welch's have participated in Catholic school education in Dansville, and I, myself, am a graduate of St. Mary's School. My 11 children were enrolled at St. Mary's, and I have five grandchildren now in attendance there.

I have had at least one child or grandchild at St. Mary's School each consecutive year since 1959. This experience, I believe, qualifies me to address the value of a Catholic school education to the family, as well as to the community.

Parenting is a challenging job — a job that has become more challenging as our world has become more complicated. The religious value system we provide to our children is bombarded every day by contrary views regarding home, happiness and success.

Our children frequently receive false messages glamorizing alcohol and drug abuse, as well as teenage sexual activity. A more recent problem, emerging as a result of the 1980s materialism, is our children's measurement of their own self-worth according to their possessions.

While the answers to these problems are never simple, a solid cornerstone of the solution is a Catholic school education working hand-in-hand with the family.

At the core of the Catholic school education is the theme, "To know God is to love Him, is to serve Him." It is from this seemingly simple phrase that every lesson emanates at St. Mary's. Each student learns — both from the textbook and from the role models provided by the school's entire staff — the importance of love and respect for one's self and one's peers, family and community.

It was the daily exposure to these fundamentals, both in school and in the home, that prepared my children to face life's challenges effectively.

The clearest expression of these fundamentals is the high academic standards maintained by St. Mary's over the years. An important element contributing to the achievement of these standards is the teaching staff. Historically, St. Mary's has been lucky to have a mix of both women religious and lay teachers.

The fact that the financial rewards of teaching in Catholic schools are not great makes more evident the teachers' motivation and commitment to ideals of religious educational. The school's small class sizes — relative to the public school — allows for a more discipline in the classroom. I strongly feel that discipline is essential to maintaining an optimum learning environment. Our teachers encourage self-discipline and seek to establish effective study habits for the children at a very early age. More importantly, our teachers are willing to meet the parents half way.

Generally speaking, my children have learned and profited by these experiences. Now my grandchildren also have the opportunity to benefit from this solid foundation.

One example of a dedicated teacher who motivated more than one of our children is Diana Oravec. She taught our son Tim in fifth grade and again in seventh grade. He had been a challenge to all of the teachers at St. Mary's. Born with eye-muscle problems, he has undergone eye surgery four times to correct this weakness.

Tim was also a dreamer. The challenge to his teachers was always determining where one problem ended and the other began. Oravec dedicated herself to trying various teaching formats until she was able to reach him more effectively. She remained in contact with the family so that the school's and the family's contributions to the solution would yield better results. She never compromised her role



Students pass a reminder of the Persian Gulf war on their way to lunch at St. Mary's School in Dansville.

with regard to discipline or commitment, nor would she accept any compromise from Tim.

Ultimately, the solution to his problem was a daily after-school one-on-one session for Tim and Oravec for most of his seventh-grade year. By year's end, his grades showed marked improvement. Oravec's and the family's contribution to harnessing Tim's talents and energies enabled him to continue to improve throughout his high school years. Today, he is attending Ohio State University.

Our youngest child, Jennifer, was also in Diana Oravec's class. She graduated from St. Mary's eighth grade in 1986. Jennifer had always been an average student. In the fall of her junior year in high school, she experienced many pressures: new leadership demands, the academic challenge of "the junior year," and adolescent peer pressures.

By Christmas, she was failing two classes, and she was performing poorly in two other classes. After much family discussion, we turned again to Diana Oravec. Together we worked to help refocus Jennifer's priorities. Oravec once again made clear her expectations of self-discipline and dedication.

Beginning in January, 1985, she and Jennifer met every day after school at St. Mary's for one-on-one tutoring sessions. They continued to meet for the rest of the year.

Oravec encouraged Jennifer to continue to seek help from her teachers and classmates. She encouraged only Jennifer's best efforts, and she would not tolerate the "I can't do it" mentality. Jennifer was able to reverse the downward trend and complete her junior year. She is now a freshman at Immaculata College in Pennsylvania.

These two examples demonstrate the quality of the education provided by the teachers at St. Mary's. There are and have been many talented teachers at the school. I chose to focus on Diana Oravec because she is an exemplary teacher who always had our children's best interests at heart. She was willing to meet us half way in addressing the totality of our children's strengths as well as weaknesses. The results speak for themselves.

Aside from the academic qualifications of St. Mary's, our school's staff also serves as a role model for our students, teaching them respect for their peers. The good example set by the staff members establishes the standard: the interaction between the staff and the students enrich the standard.

Two of our daughters, Lynn and Karen, recall frustrating experiences with certain subjects. Each spoke of having classmates who would offer to help with difficult lessons before schools, during lunch or after school. The offers of assistance were not prompted by their teachers. And these occurrences were not few and far between. They became the basis for lifelong friendships for each of our daughters.

All of these examples point to the effectiveness of the religious framework at the school, which allowed my children and my grandchildren to develop self-esteem. Religious values must be taught; faith in Jesus Christ must be nurtured. The continuity of the religious exposure in the home and in the school serves to enrich this faith as it grows. For it is this faith in Jesus Christ that supports us and helps to deal with our problems!

By today's standards, many people may feel that the problems of our family are minimal. But even with the problems many people face today, the solution remains the same. We must continue to revisit these fundamentals. Parents and teachers must continue to work together from the religious framework toward the same goals. My family has and continues to work cooperatively with St. Mary's School.

Over time, the children in the school will be the decision-making voice of our community. I find comfort in knowing that these people have a solid foundation in Christianity from which they can base their decisions. I pray that the outcome will be a community whose central theme is, "To know God is to love Him, is to serve Him."



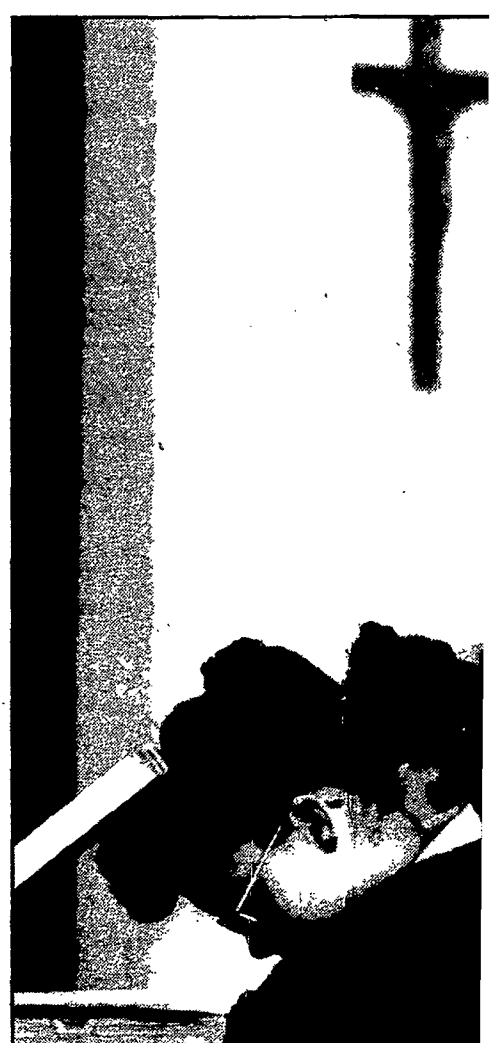
Second-grade teacher Mary Anne assignment.



Lacey LaForce, left, a third-grade student question.



Fourth-grader Cari Dickey, center, prays with her classmates before going to lunch.



Jackie Spencer uses her head during sixth-grade math class.

Photos by Babette G. Augustin