

Secretary recalls changes at Fisher

By Lee Strong
Staff writer

ROCHESTER — A lot has changed at St. John Fisher College since Margaret McMahon was hired as a part-time receptionist in 1959.

The college at 3690 East Ave. was just about to open its second building; the institution's 470 students, all male, wore jackets and ties to class; and the faculty, primarily made up of Basilian priests, was led by Father Charles Lavery, CSB, who had been named the college's president only a year before.

Today, the campus boasts 12 buildings. Fisher currently has approximately 1,650 full- and part-time undergraduate students. And female co-eds now outnumber the men on campus.

In addition, few, if any, students wear jackets and ties to class.

And now the faculty, which consists mostly of lay men and women, is led by the school's first lay president, Dr. William Pickett.

The one constant over those 32 years has been McMahon, who currently serves as the administrative assistant to Pickett. This Aug. 31, McMahon will retire.

When McMahon leaves, the college will lose more than just the president's administrative assistant, said Father Joseph Trovato, CSB, who served as

the college's chaplain from 1959-88.

"She brought real professionalism, efficiency and a knowledge of what was going on in Rochester to the job," noted Father Trovato, currently parochial vicar at Christ the King Parish in Irondequoit. "I really think she was the first lady of Fisher."

"I don't think I've ever met anyone who is as loyal and committed to an institution as Margaret is to St. John Fisher College," Pickett said. "I have faced many challenges in my five years as president. None is greater than the impossible task of finding a successor to this remarkable woman."

"Other than (Father) Charles Lavery, she is probably as well known in the community as anyone who has represented the college," said James Ryan, a member of the college's board of trustees for the past 15 years.

The subject of these accolades had no idea that she would be at the college very long when she was hired in 1959.

"I took the job really just to help out for education," said McMahon, who was raising three young children at the time she was hired. "I just thought I would help my husband in some way to pay the education costs."

Although her job description was part-time receptionist, McMahon increasingly be-



Philip Archer/Photo intern
Margaret McMahon, administrative assistant to college President William Pickett, has seen a lot of changes during her 32 years at St. John Fisher College. McMahon is scheduled to retire Aug. 31.

came involved in office work for various administrative departments — including the office of Father Lavery.

Father Lavery soon began asking McMahon to work full-time at the college. She repeatedly declined, but then in 1960, the priest came to her home to talk with McMahon and her husband.

The next morning, McMahon entered Father Lavery's office to discuss her answer with him. As the priest sat talking on the telephone, McMahon recalled, another line began ringing.

"He gestured for me to answer it, and said we'd talk later," she said. "Well, it just never stopped ringing for 22 years."

As secretary — and later administrative assistant — to the president, McMahon soon found herself caught up in the whirlwind of activity that surrounded Father Lavery and the college's rapid growth during the 1960s and '70s.

In addition to her office duties, McMahon became responsible for all the arrangements at college dinners and parties. She also took over the high volume of correspon-

dence and work involved in organizing Father Lavery's many civic activities.

Father Lavery also brought a steady stream of prominent visitors to the college. Among those guests were the bishops of Rochester from James Kearney to Matthew Clark; Cardinal Francis Spellman of New York; various New York governors and U.S. senators; and a wide variety of scholars and entertainers.

McMahon even served tea to then-Archbishop of Canterbury Michael Ramsey, who visited Rochester in 1963 for the World Council of Churches conference at the Colgate Rochester Divinity School. She recalled using her own silverware, china and linen for the occasion.

In fact, McMahon admitted that the one responsibility she will miss when she retires is the opportunity to meet so many diverse people.

When Father Lavery left the college's presidency in 1980, McMahon remained on to serve the interim president, Father Joseph Dorsey, CSB. She later served under Father Patrick Braden, CSB, who was president from 1981-85, and

now Pickett.

Ryan noted that one of McMahon's gifts was her ability to adapt to the style of each president.

"She had very different kinds of people to serve in the position of president," Ryan observed. "She seemed able to flow with the (different) styles."

In recognition of her years of service to the college, the board of trustees arranged for McMahon to receive the St. John Fisher College Medallion of Honor in 1986. Ryan recalled that board members had a hard time keeping the award secret because McMahon, as usual, was in charge of all the arrangements for the trustee dinner.

Looking back at her 32 years at the college, McMahon said she is grateful "for the opportunity to learn and to grow here in the academic atmosphere as well as the spiritual atmosphere here."

After retiring, McMahon hopes to travel and visit her children and grandchildren. She will also continue to serve as the board of trustees' secretary for a year.

When the year is up, she hopes to find other ways to serve the college.

"I hope there may be some way when I have more time that I can give back to St. John Fisher something that it has given to me," McMahon said.



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