

Ithaca seniors stay true to their Catholic school roots

By Mike Latona
Staff writer

ITHACA — Dedication to their school did not end at graduation for these Southern Tier seniors.

Immaculate Conception School still plays a vital part in the lives of Mary DeLong, Clara VanGorder and John Porcelli — even though they all graduated more than 50 years ago.

The volunteers get together each Wednesday to update the school's alumni records. DeLong, VanGorder and Porcelli are all parishioners of Immaculate Conception Church. They are assisted in their efforts by Eleanor Kane, who is also an IC parishioner but not an alumna of the school.

The project, which began three years ago, is an ambitious one based on the school's long history: Immaculate Conception opened on Sept. 8, 1884, following a dedication by Bishop Bernard McQuaid.

During the 1992-93 year, the school housed approximately 160 students in grades pre-kindergarten through 8.

DeLong, VanGorder and Porcelli have known each other since they attended Immaculate Conception School, 320 W. Buffalo St. DeLong graduated in 1936; VanGorder, in 1939; and Por-

celli, in 1935.

"All three of us were born in the same neighborhood," said DeLong.

Immaculate Conception has extended to other generations for these alumnae; they've all had other family members pass through the school as well. In fact, DeLong's four brothers and sisters, four children and two grandchildren attended school at IC.

Because of their strong ties to the past, the seniors view their current volunteering as a labor of love.

"There are a lot of good memories there," Porcelli remarked.

Updating alumni files is one of many volunteer duties performed by the senior quartet.

Between September and June, DeLong and VanGorder also enjoy coming to the school on Thursdays to help out with the traditional pizza lunches.

"The kids get so excited. They come running up, yelling, 'Pizza Day, Pizza Day,'" noted VanGorder.

The seniors are also involved in a number of church activities, such as eucharistic ministry, ushering, evangelization and booster club.

The volunteers' contributions are greatly appreciated by Father Bernard Carges, pastor of Immaculate Conception Church, 113 N. Geneva St.



Courtesy of Karen Mason
Mary DeLong, a graduate of Ithaca's Immaculate Conception School, recently received the National Catholic Education Association's Distinguished Graduate Award.

edge DeLong as the driving force behind their efforts.

DeLong — whose maiden name is Barra — was recently recognized for her school work when she was presented a Distinguished Graduate Award. This honor was established by the National Catholic Education Association to pay tribute to the achievements of Catholic elementary school graduates.

Among the other roles held by DeLong at Immaculate Conception School: longtime member and secretary of the Parent-Teacher Association; school historian and archivist; and writer of the school's alumni letter, *Immaculata*.

"You can call on her and she hardly ever says no," Father Carges commented. "I don't know where we'd be without her."

"She feels that the school has given her, and her kids, so much that she kind of wants to make sure it's there for future generations," said DeLong's daughter, Karen Mason.

Despite her numerous deeds, the publicity-shy DeLong vehemently maintains that she does not deserve any special attention. In fact, school officials — to ensure that she would be present to receive her award — asked her to attend and serve cake for awards that day without informing her that she, too, was to be a recipient.

"There are many, many people I know who have worked just as hard as I do," DeLong commented. "We have grandmothers who work during (school) lunch hour. I think our parish is outstanding for volunteers."

"They're an important aspect of the kind of support we need in the life of the school and parish," said Father Carges. "They've certainly been supportive over the years, and we're eternally grateful to them. They put in a lot of hours with the alumni records, and I don't know if people realize how much time that takes. They're our right arm."

Although all four volunteers are active in a multitude of projects at Immaculate Conception, they acknowl-

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