

Geneva students return to teach, administer

By Rob Cullivan
Staff writer

GENEVA — In 1982, Elaine Morrow applied for the principal's position at St. Francis de Sales/St. Stephen School, where she had taught for a decade.

She had attended elementary school in the Elmwood Avenue building in the late 1950s and early '60s, and had come to deeply love the school. But Morrow was rejected for the administrative job at the school, which had been formed in 1982 as a consolidation of two separate parish schools: St. Stephen's — Morrow's alma mater — and neighboring St. Francis de Sales.

Feeling rather low the day she learned of her rejection, Morrow nonetheless attended a faculty dinner that evening with her mother, Ellen "Nonnie" Stolp, who also taught at the pre-kindergarten-through-eighth-grade school. During the dinner, Morrow's mother rose to speak.

"I would like to make a toast to my daughter," Morrow remembered her mother saying. "She's been a loser as long as I can remember."

The toast broke up the faculty members present, and as the laughter subsided, Morrow said she could feel her self-pitying mood lifting.

"No matter how tough things were, she could always find the bright side of things," Morrow said of her mother, who died two years ago.

Morrow eventually got that principal's job in 1989, the year that her mother retired from teaching. Overseeing the school she attended as a child — and where her mother taught — makes her feel linked to the school



Greg Francis/Staff photographer

St. Francis de Sales/St. Stephen School Principal Elaine Morrow sits in what had been her sixth-grade homeroom when she was a student at the Geneva school.

in a way most principals don't, she said.

"It's simply like moving up a step in your family," she said. "It's like the next generation of a family taking over a family business."

Morrow is one of several staff members at St. Francis de Sales/St. Stephen with deep roots in the institution.

Nine school staff members, including Morrow, graduated from either St. Francis de Sales School, St. Stephen's School, or the current consolidated institution.

Meanwhile, three teachers at the school — including Morrow — have worked with or are working with their mothers there.

Some of the staff also have or have had children enrolled at the school. For example, three of Morrow's four children have graduated from the school, and her daughter, Leah, is currently in the fourth grade. Additionally, Morrow's two cousins, Hannah D'Amico and Sydney Hurley, are in the school's first grade, and said they enjoy going to a school run by their big cousin.

"These two will run the length of the hall and throw themselves at me," Morrow said about the two girls, who admitted they sometimes forget to call their cousin "Mrs. Morrow."

Familial affection is important, but a

more practical reason seems to make the two girls bound down the hall with joy when they see their cousin, according to Hannah.

"She gives us stickers," Hannah said.

Morrow added that she also has a grandnephew, Jared Powers, in kindergarten, which is taught by Nola Zeck, a 1987 graduate of the school. Zeck's mother, Claudia, a fourth-grade teacher, has worked at the building for three decades.

Nola remembered as a child watching her mother teach.

"I wanted to be a teacher because of her," Nola said of her mother. "It's nice to have her for support."

Nola lives with her mother, and the two women often swap ideas at the end of the day over a cup of tea, Claudia said.

"I really feel that she is a good teacher," Claudia said of Nola. "She doesn't need me to hover around, and I'm thrilled because it's a nice compliment to me that she can teach."

Both women noted that there's something about the school — and the two schools that combined to create it — that seems to make generations of families entrust their children to its teachers.

"It's family," Claudia said. "It's a wonderful place to be."

Morrow added that she herself has been thrice offered higher-paying jobs at other institutions, but turned them down because she couldn't pull herself away from St. Francis de Sales/St. Stephen.

"I just didn't want to leave the family, the closeness," she said. "Certainly, the money is not here. But the place for support is just incredible."

Association: Rochester principal one of best in the country

By Rob Cullivan
Staff writer

IRONDEQUOIT — St. Margaret Mary's School principal, Sister Mary Alice O'Brien, RSM, loves to order students to come down to her office for a little "talk." In fact, she noted, using her power to do so is one of the highlights of her day.

But when the students get there, she usually praises them for the work they do — rather than berate them for the disciplinary infractions they have committed, she said.

"I want to get rid of the idea that you only come to the principal's office when you're in trouble," said Sister O'Brien, who has been principal at St. Margaret Mary's since July.

Sister O'Brien has been accentuating the positive since 1958 in a distinguished career as a diocesan teacher and administrator. Her many admiring colleagues include Roselane Marcella, a staff counselor and human services director at St. Andrew's School in Rochester, where Sister O'Brien



was principal from 1982 until she moved to her current position. "She never used her authority to dictate what people should or shouldn't do," Marcella said of the Mercy sister. "She used it for the development of her staff. I think that's an asset that most people in authority wish they had, but to her it comes naturally."

Sister O'Brien's was one of 12 administrators from an equal number of regions in the nation to be named a 1998 "Distinguished Principal" by the Washington, D.C.-based National Catholic Education Association.

Sister O'Brien was selected for top honors among New York state elementary school principals, according to John Burke, principal of St. Thomas Aquinas School in the Bronx. Burke serves as the state's elementary school principal representative to the NCEA.

Burke added that Sister O'Brien will be presented with her award April 14 at a banquet during the NCEA's national convention in Los Angeles.

In particular, Burke said, the five-member NCEA committee that chose Sister O'Brien was impressed that she integrated the spirituality of her order, the Sisters of Mercy, into the daily lives of her students. For example, he pointed out that Sister O'Brien rewrote the Suscipe — Prayer of Petition — penned by the Mercy order's foundress, Catherine McAuley, so that children could recite it every day.

"She made it applicable to her children in their prayer life," he said. "That really stood out."

Sister Virginia Steinwachs, SSJ, assistant superintendent for diocesan schools, said Sister O'Brien has been one of the most innovative principals in the diocese.

Sister Steinwachs noted, in particular, Sister O'Brien's creation of a "Justice and Peace" program at St. Andrew's. The program was based on a high school program developed in the 1980s by a fellow Sister of Mercy, Sister O'Brien said.

The program united the school's children around such specific themes as peace or multicultural appreciation each year. The theme was promoted via posters and banners in the school, Sister O'Brien said, and the children put the theme into action through community service projects.

Although she has only been at St. Margaret Mary's for a short time, Sister O'Brien has already won over the staff, according to Diane Anderson, teacher-in-charge at the school when Sister O'Brien is out.

Anderson, who also runs a self-esteem enhancement program at St. Margaret Mary's, said Sister O'Brien has fit right in at the school.

"She's very good at working with the children and encouraging them and enhancing them in their good areas," Anderson said.

That notion was echoed by Julie Murphy, whose daughter Erin, a third-grader, and son, Christopher, a first-grader, attend St. Margaret Mary's.

"Kids don't think of her as a disciplinarian," Murphy said. "They think of her as a friend. They like to come here."

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