

DIOCESAN NEWS

St. Michael's principal plans to retire

By Jennifer Ficaglia
Assistant Editor

Kathy Peters remembers the first time she saw St. Michael's School in Newark.

It was August 15, 1993, just two weeks before she began her new job as principal. She didn't have access to the building until then. Peters had just graduated from the University of Rochester with a master's degree in administration on May 23, and had been offered the principal position the following day. She accepted it without ever having laid eyes on the school.

When she finally saw St. Michael's, she wasn't impressed. By the looks of it, Peters said, it was a school to which she would not want to send her children.

"It was old and drab," Peters remembers. "Walls hadn't been painted in years. Things had just been let go."

Peters didn't have a budget to make the school a more welcoming place before classes started in September, but that didn't stop her. Taking money from her own pocket, she set to work, enlisting the help of teachers and parents to brighten up the classrooms.

"I was always kind of a rebel in life," she said. "Sometimes a rebel leader, always trying to better things."

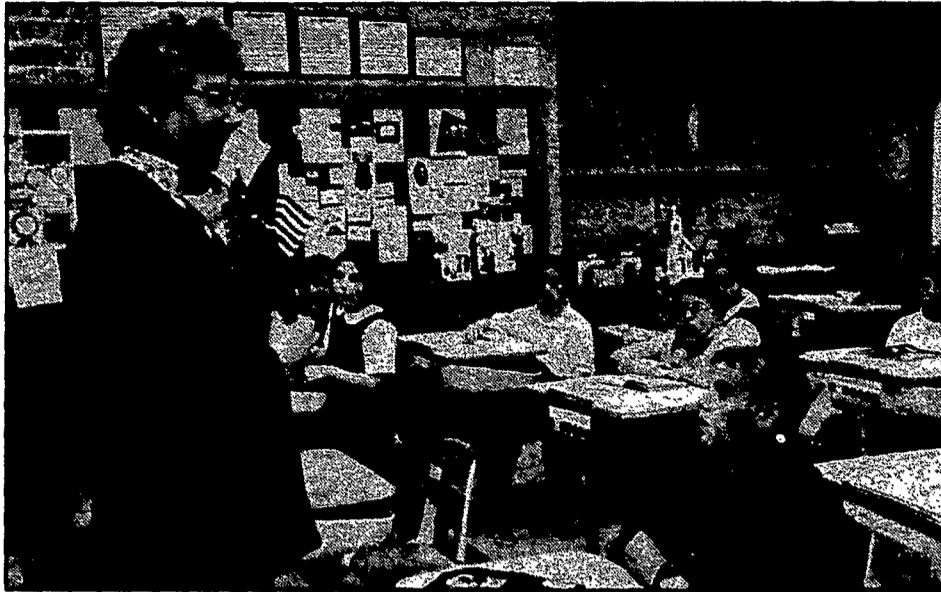
Peters bought material and asked students' mothers to make curtains for the preschool. She also asked fathers to make shelves for the classrooms. Peters said she always found it important to make herself known in the community, so she visited area businesses to introduce herself. She wound up coming back with donations of paint and carpeting for the school.

In two week's time, the new principal and her volunteers transformed the interior of the school.

Peters fondly shared stories from her nine years at St. Michael's as her principalship there draws to a close. She is set to retire from the position June 30.

Peters said she never envisioned herself working at a Catholic school. A 1968 graduate of Buffalo State College, Peters taught in California for a time then moved back to New York with her husband, Don. They settled in Waterloo, where Peters worked as a substitute teacher for the Waterloo public schools while raising three children.

In the early 1980s, she was approached by a priest from her parish, St. Mary's in Waterloo, asking her to be a member of the parish council's education subcommittee. She resisted at first, then finally agreed. Soon after she decided to volunteer at St. Mary's School, teaching art to third-



Andrea Dixon/Staff photographer

Kathy Peters, principal of St. Michael's School in Newark, hands out achievement awards in Colleen Spelley's fourth-grade classroom April 22. Peters is retiring at the end of the school year.

graders.

It was then she became hooked on Catholic education.

"From the moment I came into the school, there was a difference," Peters remembers, noting how well behaved the children were. "What I love best about Catholic education is that it's Christ-centered. It makes a difference."

Peters not only enrolled her children at St. Mary's, she became a kindergarten teacher there in 1985.

In 1990, Peters decided to go back to school for her master's degree in administration.

"I just saw a lot of things that should be done in Catholic education," she said. "I thought I could do it."

Enter St. Michael's.

Peters had been warned by an administrator friend not to accept the St. Michael's principalship because some of the school's faculty members were difficult. She didn't listen.

"I always like a challenge," Peters said.

One of the challenges was learning the ropes of being an administrator — learning more about all curricula, not just those she had taught; learning how to do budgets; learning that you can't push people. It was a trial-and-error process for the first five years, she said.

Even though she was learning, Peters went full steam ahead, making changes as she saw fit.

The second year of her principalship, Peters made a change in the students' lunch

situation. At the time, students had a half an hour for lunch and ate in their classrooms with their teachers.

When the school received a \$500 donation, Peters used it to buy tables for the gym so students could eat lunch there and teachers could have some time for themselves during the day.

Peters also helped usher St. Michael's into the technology age. With the help of parent volunteers, a computer classroom was built. The school now has a total of 80 computers, as well as a Web site (www.stmichael-newark.org).

She not only wanted to achieve computer literacy among the students, but among her faculty as well. She forced teachers to gain some computer skills by requiring them to keep track of grades using the Microsoft spreadsheet program, Excel, and to type parent letters and in-house memos using the computer. Now, teachers are so comfortable with technology that many of them even take online courses.

Peters also worked with teachers to make the school's science program more hands-on because students' science scores were low. St. Michael's began using a curriculum from the Board of Cooperative Educational Services that complemented its own and students began doing such projects as making worm farms and studying owl pellets. And science scores have gone up, she said.

The people are what Peters says she will miss the most about St. Michael's.

"The parents are so wonderful. They have done so much," she said. "I have a marvelous group of faculty. I'll miss the children most of all. I love children."

Peters said she will continue to work with children, and dreams of working in recruitment and public relations at DeSales High School in Geneva. If that position does not pan out, she plans to go back to teaching.

"We'll see where God leads me," she said.

Obituary

St. Rockenbrock; Sister of Mercy

Sister Mary Thaddeus Rockenbrock, who served in many support staff roles during her nearly 60 years as a member of the Rochester Sisters of Mercy, died March 22, 2002, at Rochester General Hospital from complications following heart surgery. She was 77 years old.

Born Audrey Rockenbrock, Sister Thaddeus was a Rochester native who grew up in Holy Cross Parish in Charlotte. She graduated from Our Lady of Mercy High School in 1942 and entered the Sisters of Mercy that year, professing her perpetual vows six years later. She attended Nazareth Normal School (1942-45) and studied home economics at St. Joseph College in Emmitsburg, Md. (1948-49).

Assigned most often to food service, Sister Thaddeus served on the cafeteria staff at Our Lady of Mercy High School from 1945-48 and 1952-62. From 1948-52, she ministered in the motherhouse kitchen.

From 1962-73, she served as a convent cook at Holy Cross Parish. Beginning in 1973 Sister Thaddeus worked on the clerical staff at Cardinal Mooney High School, serving until the school closed in 1989. Sister Thaddeus then became a postal clerk at the motherhouse (1989-92). She joined the order's spiritual apostolate in 1992, and continued to sort mail as a volunteer when needed.

Sister Thaddeus is survived by her sister, Sister Mary Jude Rockenbrock, RSM, sister-in-law, Audrey Rockenbrock, nieces and nephews, and the Sisters of Mercy.

Sister Thaddeus' funeral Mass was celebrated March 26 at the Mercy Motherhouse chapel, with Father Matthew Kawiak presiding. Interment was at Holy Sepulchre Cemetery.

Memorials may be made to the Sisters of Mercy, 1437 Blossom Road, Rochester, NY 14610.

Mike Lalona

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