

Colossal reunion thrills 1919 grad

Mike Latona/Catholic Courier

ROCHESTER — On Oct. 27, the walls of the Wishing Well Party House were temporarily covered by portraits of graduating classes from Holy Rosary School. Yet one photo, from the class of 1919 — along with the diploma of a class member — merited special display on a table near the entrance.

That's because the owner of those keepsakes, 97-year-old Marie McDonell, was in the building. She holds the distinction of being the oldest graduate attending the mammoth school reunion.

The announced crowd of more than 500 guests included alumni from several decades, as well as many former faculty members and parish priests. Laughter and loud conversation filled the banquet hall as participants enthusiastically renewed acquaintances.

A large segment of the alums, including McDonell, had begun the day by attending the 9:30 a.m. Mass at Holy Rosary Church. A tour of the school, located at 420 Lexington Ave., also was offered. Some graduates were unfamiliar with the current facility, which opened in 1983 after a fire destroyed the original 77-year-old school building on Dec. 19, 1981.

McDonell skipped the school tour due to difficulties with walking, but expressed delight that the school remains in operation today. She also noted that Holy Rosary Church looks very much the same as it did when she was growing up.

"It felt wonderful to see the church again," said McDonell, who resides at The Heritage, a residence of St. Ann's Community.

As she exited the church McDonell paused to reminisce about buildings in the area, noting that a house across the street used to serve as a rectory. Later, at the brunch, she recalled her days attending Holy Rosary School.

"When I went to school they had a frame building. Sister Edith taught the first grade," she said. McDonell also noted that "the nuns

were dedicated to the pupils."

Lay faculty has largely replaced the Sisters of St. Joseph at Holy Rosary School, and student demographics have changed as well. Whereas the student population was mainly of European descent when McDonell was a student, a pamphlet distributed at the reunion notes that the school — which now serves grades pre-kindergarten through 6 — today has an African-American population of 47 percent; Caucasian, 34 percent; Hispanic, 14 percent; and Asian, 5 percent. In addition, 78 percent of the 177 students fall below the national poverty level.

McDonell grew up on Dewey Avenue between Emerson Street and Ravine Avenue. She attended Holy Rosary School from first through eighth grades, and went on to graduate from Nazareth Academy. She settled in Greece with her husband of 42 years, the late Francis McDonell, and attended St. John the Evangelist Parish on Ridge Road. McDonell worked for many years as a secretary for Seneca Shoe Co., Elam Shoe Co. and Central Trust Bank. She retired from Central Trust in 1966.

McDonell attended the Holy Rosary reunion with a large family contingent, all of them Holy Rosary graduates: nephew Jim Eggleston and nieces Maggie Piecuch, Carol Faker and Patty Kelpin. McDonell, who has no children of her own, said she is close with the four siblings, explaining, "This is the only family I have left."

McDonell's clan made up about 1 percent of a group that far exceeded what reunion organizers had anticipated. In fact, Piecuch likened the cramped conditions to "the loaves and fishes," referring to the Gospel story in which Jesus fed 5,000 people.

"I think it's wonderful, such a big turnout — that we all came together like this," McDonell said.



Karin von Voigtlander/Catholic Courier

Marie McDonell (center), a member of the class of 1919, attended a special Holy Family School alumni Mass and reunion Oct. 27. Accompanying McDonell were her nephew James Eggleston and nieces (from left) Carol Faker, Margaret Piecuch and Patty Kelpin. All four are also Holy Rosary alumni.



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