

Elmira educator sets the bar high

Mike Latona/Catholic Courier

ELMIRA — With profound seriousness, Sister Mary Carmella Coene leaned in close to Jared Miranda and gazed intently into his eyes. “Look — you’re saying the answer, but you’re not paying any attention to what you’re talking about,” the Sister of Mercy said in a quiet, stern tone. Meanwhile, Jared gave an occasional scratch of the head as he grappled with protons, neutrons and other facets of chemistry. As he prepared to leave, Sister Coene told him, “I would be glad to help on Saturday and Sunday.”

The scene was a recent Friday afternoon in the tutoring room at Notre Dame High School, where Sister Coene spends many of her mornings and afternoons. At the age of 94, she is still vital to the educational well-being of Notre Dame students — a role she has willingly held ever since the high school was founded in 1955.

Sister Coene had already been a teacher for 28 years when she began at Notre Dame. She carried a full-time teaching load until 1998, and has moved into tutoring in recent years. Add it all up, and she’s been involved in education for some 75 years.

Lest one think Sister Coene is mellowing with age, here’s how she sizes up her tutoring sessions: “There’s no nonsense. I expect them to get here on time, and ex-

pect them to get the work done,” she stated.

Jared, a 16-year-old junior, observed that Sister Coene likes to laugh and tell stories — but not during tutoring time. “She can be really tough on you sometimes, but she just wants to make sure you know your information. Sometimes I get a little frustrated and stuff, but that’s just the way she teaches and it’s helped me a lot. I really, really appreciate what she’s doing for me,” said Jared, who credits Sister Coene with helping him score a 90 on an exam earlier this school year.

Jared said he’s not really conscious of the fact that Sister Coene is 94 years old. “She sure doesn’t seem like it. She has so much energy when she works with students. She’s there every single day,” said Jared, a parishioner of St. Casimir/St. Charles Borromeo in Elmira.

No matter what the subject, Sister Coene has approached each school year with high expectations. “I would walk in and say ‘Nobody fails’ — and nobody failed,” she said. One of her more recent classes started the year on a shaky note: “They were terrible, terrible — they didn’t want to learn,” Sister Coene said. After a pause, she added, “But come June we had good results.”

Sister of Mercy Mary Walter Hickey, the high school’s principal since 1975, acknowledged that Sis-



Karin von Voigtlander/Catholic Courier

Mercy Sister Mary Carmella Coene smiles as she tutors Notre Dame High School juniors Brandy Wakeman and James Borra in chemistry at the Elmira school Jan. 16.

Celebrating Catholic Schools

ter Coene is traditionally pessimistic in September. “She would say ‘They don’t know anything, they’ll never pass.’ That would be like a broken record,” Sister Hickey said. “And then they’d take the exam and they’d get above 90.”

Sister Hickey said the achievement level of Sister Coene’s students has been “off the wall.” The principal said Sister Coene is still coveted by students at exam time; she recently drew a classroom full of students for a review session. Part of Sister Coene’s success, Sister Hickey said, stems from her desire for students to think beyond simply getting the answer right. “She says, ‘I want them to understand why,’” Sister Hickey remarked.

Sister Coene grew up in Greece, a suburb of Rochester, and graduated from Sacred Heart School and Nazareth Academy. She entered the Sisters of Mercy in December 1926, and one month later, the 18-year-old was getting on-the-job teaching training at St. Patrick’s School in Elmira. “After March I was on my own,” she said.

Along the way Sister Coene has also taught at Our Lady of Mercy High, Rochester; Catholic High, Elmira; Holy Family High, Auburn; St. Ann’s High, Hornell; and St. Mary’s Elementary, Corning. But the lion’s share of her time has been spent at Notre Dame, where her

specialties have been math and science. She has also led such courses as typing and bookkeeping. “I’ve taught a little of everything,” she said with a laugh.


Her dedication is so valued at Notre Dame that a new science wing, to be constructed within the next few years, will be named after her. This plan was divulged last fall when a party, with hundreds of people attending, was held at the high school honoring Sister Coene’s 75 years in education.

Sister Coene, who lives at the sisters’ residence on the Notre Dame campus, celebrated her 94th birthday on Dec. 21. She has no desire to cut back her present role as a tutor, saying, “I’ve had good health, and I might say I enjoy this.”

Sister Coene said she relishes the challenge of working with teens, playing the role of taskmaster in hopes of enhancing future success. “They might not always like it, they might not always respond. But in later years it may come to light, that day-to-day formation,” she explained.

Indeed, the long-time teacher said, many former students voiced their appreciation during her big party last fall. Others have conveyed similar sentiments through the mail.

“That was a very satisfying thing to hear. It does make you feel good,” she remarked.



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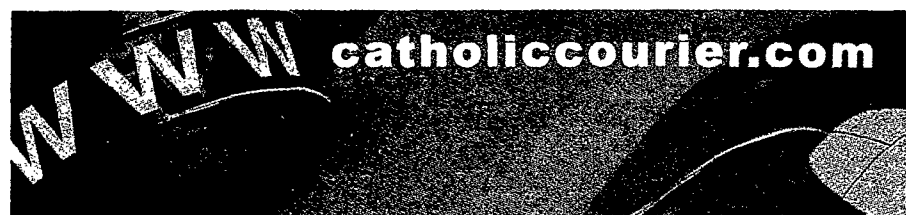
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