

Days are all good for 100-year-old

Mike Latona/Catholic Courier

BRIGHTON — Ask Mercy Sister Mary Julia Ryan to reflect on the ups and downs of her teaching career, and you'll get a hint as to why she stayed in the field for so long.

"I can't remember any bad days," Sister Ryan stated.

More good days lie ahead for Sister Ryan. She's turning 100 years old on April 28, and will celebrate with a big party at the Sisters of Mercy Motherhouse on Sunday, April 27, from 2 to 4 p.m. It's free and open to the public.

Sister Ryan is now the oldest living woman religious in any order in the Diocese of Rochester. She has been slowed recently by illness, but hopes to be walking around again by the time of her party. Her mind remains sharp, as evidenced by the witty stories she spun during a recent interview.

For instance, Sister Ryan said that early in her teaching career, she was abruptly told to teach high-school physics instead of her specialty, math. One small problem: not only had Sister Ryan never taught physics, she had never taken it in school, either.

"My superior said 'Well, read the book.' So I had a book here, a book here, and a book here. If I didn't understand one book, I'd go to the other," Sister Ryan said, laughing.

Sister Ryan is a native of Erie County. She moved to Rochester as a high-school student and entered the Sisters of Mercy in 1921, not long after she converted to Catholicism. She later graduated from St. Bonaventure University.

In 1931, after brief teaching stints



Rebecca Gosselin/Catholic Courier

Mercy Sister Mary Julia Ryan, who will turn 100 on April 28, sits in the chapel at the Sister's of Mercy Motherhouse April 7.

at several diocesan elementary schools, Sister Ryan settled in for a 26-year stay at Holy Family High School in Auburn. One of her many students was Father William Donnelly, Class of 1956, who is now the pastor of St. Mary's Parish in Rochester.

"She was always able to get by the difficulties people gave her," said Father Donnelly, who admitted to being one of those unruly teens. Father Donnelly said that Sister Ryan's kindness and dedication was cherished by students long after they had graduated, and that she helped several of her former students get into college after having served in the Korean War. In the 1970s, he added, Sister Ryan spent much of her limited income on piano lessons for inner-city children.

After leaving Holy Family, Sister

Ryan worked for many years in the Our Lady of Mercy High School library and was also active as a tutor. In 1975, she began a 17-year stint tutoring inmates at the Monroe County Jail.

"People asked me if I was afraid and I was never afraid once," Sister Ryan said. The inmates, she recalled, were "really very nice to me; they were respectful."

Sister Ryan retired from jail ministry in 1992, at the age of 88, and has since been a spiritual apostolate for the Mercy order. She resides in the McAuley Residence at the motherhouse.

The soon-to-be centenarian is looking forward to seeing lots of friends at her birthday shindig. She said many people have been asking her how it feels to be 100: "To tell you the truth, I haven't thought anything of it."

Well, she's apparently thinking more about it now. Asked if she's well acquainted with Sister Mary Carmella Coene, a Sister of Mercy who was featured in the *Courier* earlier this year, Sister Ryan quickly replied "She's not as old as I am."

Sister Coene is a mere 94.

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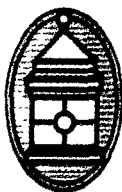
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