

# An era ends at Brockport's Nativity

Tears and smiles mark school's last moments

Rob Cullivan/Catholic Courier

BROCKPORT — Diane Hage, physical-education teacher at Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary School in Brockport, spoke for many teachers at the school's closing ceremony. "It's been a tough day — a tough day," she said.

Music, prayers, poetry and tearful goodbyes filled the school's gymnasium June 20 as students, parents, teachers and staff gathered to bid farewell to each other and to the 127-year-old institution. More than 150 people attended the ceremony marking the school's closing, a move that had been recommended to Bishop Matthew H. Clark in April. The school, which opened in 1876, had suffered from decreasing enrollment and financial problems.

The closing ceremony also featured the presentation of gifts and certificates to students and school officials. Many parents and teachers shed tears as students and school officials spoke with warmth about each other and Nativity.

René Onorato, a teacher's aide for the past two years, held a stuffed angel bear given to her by fourth-grader Rebecca Reid, who, along with fourth-grader Cherie Sailus, read the audience a poem about the school.

"It's very sad," Onorato said of the closing. "I'll miss the kids."

School Principal Maggie Frank noted it was a bittersweet goodbye.

"I feel sad right now, but I know the children will go and do well at other schools and bring the warmth and friendliness of Nativity with them," she said.

She added that more than one-third of her 60 students will attend St. John the Evangelist School in Spencerport next year. A few more than a handful of children will go to St. Lawrence School and Mother of Sorrows School in Greece as well as Holy Family School in Le Roy in the



Karin von Voigtlander/Catholic Courier

Students at Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary School in Brockport release balloons outside the school during a closing ceremony June 20.

Diocese of Buffalo. The rest of the student body will probably enroll in public schools, she said. Frank said she will teach fourth grade at St. Rita's School in Webster in the fall.

Ben Barrow, whose son, Bennie, is in kindergarten, said he would particularly miss Frank.

"She took an interest in every single kid," Barrow said. "She knew so much about every single kid."

Chris Wilson, who went to Nativity from 1987-88, played acoustic guitar for the assembly and sang his own songs and those of such stars as Simon and Garfunkel and Chuck Berry. Wilson, who in 1998 placed second on MTV's national talent show "The Cut," said he's performed at the school before and didn't want to miss the closing.

"This school has been such a pres-

ence in this community," he said, adding of the students: "These guys are the best! I feel like a rock star every time I come here."

Bill Hayles, who heads the school's advisory committee, said he saw many "silent supporters" at the closing ceremony, people who did everything from volunteer at school events to help keep the school in repair.

"To look around and see these faces is a great and sad thing at the same time," he said.

Hayles' wife, Patricia, chairs the Monroe County Catholic Schools Board, and shared her husband's sentiments about the day.

"This is about the saddest thing that I've had to do," she said, likening the closing ceremony to a funeral of a friend. "It's like a good long life, and I hope that people will remember that in the end."

The closing came after a decade-long enrollment decline at the school, which only drew 60 students at the beginning of the 2002-03 school year. Enrollment in pre-kindergarten to fifth grade has dropped more than 50 percent over the past 10 years, according to the Diocese of Rochester, which noted that fewer than 50 students had planned to enroll for 2003-04, with just five students each in first and

fourth grades.

Low enrollment also made the cost of educating students at Nativity much higher than that of educating students at other Monroe County Catholic schools, the diocese said, adding that the school building also needed various repairs costing more than \$100,000. Father Peter Enyan-Boadu, pastor of Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary Parish, said no decisions have been made regarding the future use of the building.

At the end of the closing ceremony, the pastor spoke to the assembly about what Nativity meant to them and to Brockport. He added that the best part of Nativity was the students who were leaving it that day.

"They are indeed the butterflies of hope," he said. "They are indeed the stars of tomorrow."

On that note, the school community exited the gymnasium and went outside to the flagpole, where students released dozens of balloons into the sky to mark the end of the day.

First-grader Martha Johnson summed up the mood of everyone when she said she felt bad about the school closing, adding that she still wanted to go to Nativity. But she also had a smile, as she watched the balloons ascending into the sunny sky.

"Happy travels!" she said.

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