



# Holy Rosary

MEMORIES OLD & NEW

Years before they married, Pete and Thelma Saunders declared their love for one another in bright yellow paint in the basement of Holy Rosary school. “Pete plus Thelma,” the hand painted declaration read. In another area of the school, in a small space under a set of stairs, where nearly a century ago (the school hasn’t had a football team since the ‘20s) football players had stashed helmets and other equipment, a play, marked with Xs and Os was chalked on the wood. Thousands of memories were made permanent at the school, which is in the final stages of demolition in early 2019.

For over a century, Catholic education has flourished in the rural community of Monroe City in northeast Missouri. Holy Rosary school first opened in 1901, its four rooms bursting at the seams, as nearly 90 students gathered to learn inside. A new school was erected in 1920 and saw

thousands of students pass through its halls and classrooms until 2016, when time and weather finally rendered the building unusable. But the community and parish did not see this as an end to Catholic education in the area, instead they came together to pledge enough to build a brand new school to continue the Holy Rosary legacy. Today, the new school is host to 175 pre-k through 8th graders and a staff of roughly a dozen, many of whom are former Holy Rosary students. In its early years, the school also had a robust population. “The first school building had just four rooms, and had approximately 90 students that first year,” Holy Rosary Principal Sr. Suzanne Walker says. “They went from first grade through junior year in that first year.” Throughout its history, Holy Rosary has always been led by a Dominican Sister of Sparkill, New York. “In 1901, the pastor who wanted to start this school knew of these sisters in New York and had asked them if they would send somebody to be teachers in his school,” Sr. Suzanne says. “And so they did; they sent four sisters. All through these years, the Dominican sisters of Sparkill have been in this school, and I’m the only one now.”

Principal Sr. Suzanne Walker isn’t just part of the succession of sisters, she’s also a former Holy



Rosary student. She's spent most of her life at the school, attending through high school graduation, then returning years later as a teacher. "I went to the mother house in New York, was there for three years and taught in the Bronx in the days when, in the first grade, you had 52 students," she recalls. "I had reading groups, 20 in one group, 20 in the next group. It was [overwhelming] especially being my first year teaching. But that was the way it was a long time ago." New opportunities began to arise after a move to St. Louis, and changes in the way teaching assignments were made. "You didn't have to be assigned, you could choose and apply," she says. "There was an opening at my alma mater in the 2<sup>nd</sup> grade. So I asked myself if I'd want to come back to my hometown as a sister and a teacher. So, I did, and I've been here ever since." Sr. Suzanne taught in various grade levels until 1984 when she became principal, succeeding a number of Dominican sisters before her who have fostered a sense of spiritual learning in their students. It wasn't easy to say goodbye to a building that held so many personal memories. "I was kind of like oh, well my heart and soul is in that old building," she says. But the modern amenities have made the transition easier. "I haven't missed it because this one is so comfortable and so nice."

Much nicer, she says, than the days when extreme weather meant comfort was nowhere to be found. On the hottest days, Holy Rosary would shut its doors before noon, letting students escape the unairconditioned space. On the coldest days, Sr. Suzanne would slip out of her bed half an hour earlier than usual, throw on several warm layers and boots, and head across the street to the school to light the boiler, the only source of heat in the old school. She doesn't miss that. For her, it's the simple things about the new school that make it so great. "This new building is so comfortable," she says. "The old building was almost 100 years old. We were at 96 years. Three flights [of stairs], and the plumbing was bad, and the heat was only on or off, with an old boiler system. No energy efficiency, no air conditioning anywhere in the old building. This one is just so bright and spacious." Though the building was no longer suitable for a school, its bones still had value. Almost everything from the old school was sold or repurposed. "They took up the old wood floors plank by plank, and it's yellow pine," Sr. Suzanne says. "There's a big call for that, people love to take them and refinish and repurpose them. It's so good to think that's not being taken to a landfill, all that great wood." The fir subfloors went to China, doors and doorknobs all over the country, and some statues and artifacts made their way into the new school building.

