



St. Eustachius

PAST, PRESENT & FUTURE

No one really knows when or why Spanish architecture became the face of the grounds of St. Eustachius school and parish in Portageville, but it's certainly become part of the history, and the future, of the small town. So when plans were drawn up for a new school, the vision was important. "We really wanted it to just flow and look like we just set it down, that it's been here for a while," principal Tricia Rone says. "We didn't want something that looked brand new or different or anything else." This vision was more than aesthetic; the goal was to maintain a unified school that delivers quality education rooted in Catholic tradition, as it has since 1917—only this time with better plumbing.

Throughout its 100 years, the old school building gathered many memories, but near the end, had developed even more problems. Crumbling plaster, constant plumbing issues, lack of proper heat and AC and the general lack of space

restricted the reach of the school's educational capabilities. This August, after years of planning and fundraising, Principal Rone and her students celebrated the century-old history by opening a new chapter of their story in a brand new school building. But not everything on the property is completely new—it was important to everyone involved to save what they could. "We don't just want to go tearing things down for the sake of tearing them down," Bob Darst, who coaches the school basketball team, serves on the building committee, and whose wife is also a teacher at St. Eustachius, says. Instead, they repurposed one of the buildings in a creative way. "The convent houses offices [for parish staff] and the upstairs... we just decided to make it habitable for guests to stay if they were coming in to visit families, etc., so we took it upon ourselves to each decorate a room. We did the carpet as a parish but painting, furnishing and everything else we did ourselves." About 10 rooms are available, and each one has its own style. "It's fun—families took different bedrooms and they could decorate them how they wanted to," Darst says. "In fact, when the bishop

came he said, ‘we’re going to have some retreats over here!’” For former students, it’s a fun way to circumvent a few of the rules they had to abide by as kids. “I think half the reason people want to stay in the convent is because as kids they were never allowed to go up there,” he says.

St. Eustachius school and the parish are closely intertwined, even though many of the parish members have no direct tie to the school population. The students and parish members participate in a prayer buddy program, an act which “keeps the parish young,” Darst says. “It’s designed for parishioners who don’t have the tie in, don’t have a kid in school or a grandkid in school. Those kids love it, they have a special day for it every year. I remember my prayer buddies all through the years, they’re special in that way. They do a really good job of writing letters four or five times a year. They’ve made it where the idea is to pray for your prayer buddy and they’ll pray for you, meet at a couple events throughout the year and take pictures. It’s amazing how many people’s houses you walk into, they have a picture of their prayer buddy on the refrigerator.”

The population in Portageville is not overwhelmingly Catholic, but the support for St. Eustachius school has always been abundant. As seen in many other Catholic schools, a number of students are not of the Catholic, or even Christian, faith. But that hasn’t made a difference in the way Catholicism is intertwined in daily education. This commitment has led to conversions of the heart for several students and families. Darst has seen the power of Catholic education change the lives of students. “I could give you testimonies all day,” he says. One of the most meaningful to him has been a niece whose parents are non-practicing Catholics. “She decided on her own this year that she wanted to become Catholic,” he says. “It’s crazy, an 8th grader who decides that. What’s even been better about the whole deal is that she never misses church; I was up in New Madrid Saturday morning for the 8 am mass for the holy day and I looked behind me in the pew and she was there with her grandmother. [Her grandmother] said, ‘she told me we needed to go.’ To me that’s a real testimony to what they do here at the school. That’s what impacted her. What she’s learned inside these walls prompted her to become Catholic.” St. Eustachius school incorporates creativity into the delivery of Catholic teaching, a method that helps get





St. Eustachius school was originally a brick building, but sometime in the last century it was stuccoed to match the style of the adjacent church and convent. Though those in the Portageville community aren't sure when or why the Spanish style was introduced, when the new school was built, honoring this same Spanish design was important.

students engaged in a fun and faith-filled way. "We do a lot of activities and service projects that promote what the Catholic faith is all about, which is service," Rone says. "Being of service to others makes you feel joyful, and we want them one day to be able to do that [on their own] and give back to the community."

When a small town, or any town, builds a new school, it's an investment in the future. Whether that's another 100 years or another five, it is worth the while, Darst says. "During one of our town hall meetings, people said, 'well how can you know that you're going to have a consistent population for the next 100 years?' And I said well I don't know that, and you don't either. And our forefathers who built this in 1917 didn't know that, and for whatever reason, I do believe that it was much tougher in 1917 to build a brand-new school that what it is now." Darst encouraged the group to look at things from a different perspective. "I said, my challenge to you is if you thought you could keep the student population here, the need for a Catholic school for 20 years, would you donate today? Would that change your contribution? Because that's how I kind of challenge myself—who knows what the future holds, but isn't it that important for the next 20 years?" His words lit a spark. "I had a parishioner come up to me afterwards and he said, 'why did you say that?' And I said it's just



the way I feel about it; who knows what's going to happen in 20 years, but it's just a much smaller time frame and you can feel pretty good about that. Why would that change, if Catholic education is important for 100 years, why shouldn't it be important for 20? And I thought he was going to say, well that's ridiculous, you should never do that, and he said, 'you should have said 10 years. I wouldn't change my contribution if you had said 10 years.'" At that moment, Darst knew the new school was a real possibility. "I thought wow, maybe that's the feeling that's out there. We were all extremely passionate about the project, and it's just been wonderful. It's great to have new things, but more than anything else it signifies how we feel about continuing Catholic education...to me it signifies the fact that Catholic education is embodied in what we believe in, and it's going to continue here."