

Seeds of faith sown for generations at St. Mary School



In the early 1880s, St. Mary School in Big Rapids sat amidst a city that bustled with activity spurred by the burgeoning lumber industry that had sprung up along the Muskegon River. Students at the school came from families living in Big Rapids and smaller, nearby communities such as Remus, White Cloud, Reed City and

Today, more than 125 years later, St. Mary continues to serve families, that have sent generations of children to the school where academics are intertwined with the principles of Catholicism.

The school's rich community history and its commitment to providing a Catholic education have been at the root of its success and will be in the future, said Rev. Lam Le, pastor of St. Mary Parish.

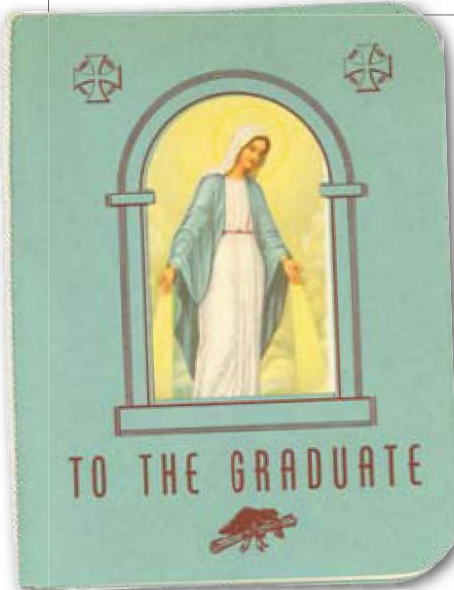
"We are not competing with the public schools because we offer something entirely different," said Father Le. "We share in the teaching the ministry of Jesus and the Church. Catholic education comes about to promote and pass on the gift of faith. Our teachings are timeless and able to survive the challenges for the past 125 years."

St. Mary School Principal Barb Borth

takes a similar view. After retiring from a 30-year career in public education, she accepted the call to serve as principal and plans to help carry on the school's long tradition of bringing Catholic education to the children of families in Big Rapids and the surrounding area.

Because of the commitment of the parish and school staff over the years to educating children in mind, body and spirit, St. Mary School has had a lasting impact on generations of students who've attended classes there including Patricia "Pat" Brejcha.

Now in her seventies and married for over 50 years to husband Mathias "Matt", Pat Brejcha was a first grader at St. Mary's School in 1937 and attended through the 8th grade. Long-time parishioners of St. Mary Church, Matt



► **The cover of Pat Brejcha's diploma from St. Mary School received June 10, 1945.**

By MaryBeth Barkeley

Photos by Jonathan Tramontana

► **Below:** Sister Mary Oswald, principal of St. Mary School during the 1940s, enjoys swinging with a student.



“ It is a great environment to work in. I get to help people out. It is more than a job, it is like a ministry. **I feel like I have always been guided.** ”



► (circa 1940s) Students from St. Mary School prepare to enter the church for their First Communion.

and Pat sent all five of their children to St. Mary School and grandson Matthew also attended St. Mary.

Although Pat's mother was not Catholic, her father insisted on a Catholic education for Pat and her younger sister. The Sisters of Mercy took care of the school from 1883 to 1973 and Pat's most vivid memories include teachers like

Sister Mary Celeste, who taught her in the first few grades and remained a close friend until she recently passed away at age 91.

In 1943, when Pat was in sixth grade, her father died and the nuns comforted her, her mother and sister through their loss and the grieving process.



► **Sister Mary Celeste**
(circa 1970s)

► Matt and Pat Brejcha (seated), along with their son Mike (standing left) and his son Matthew, visit with St. Mary School's Kindergarten class.



“Those sisters were so wonderful to our family when dad died,” Pat said. The support, care and kindness of the nuns left such an impression on Pat’s mother that she took instruction and converted to the Catholic faith shortly after her husband’s funeral.

Matt Brejcha did not attend St. Mary School, but instead took lessons on living the Catholic faith from a different

source, his father. “My dad was a very good Catholic,” Matt said. He attended Mass every Sunday and I went with him. He was my example.”

Matt and Pat Brejcha’s five children were educated at St. Mary School during the 1960s and ’70s. They are all adults now with families of their own. Two of the siblings, Mike and Mary Ann, have remained in Big Rapids where



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were grounded in the Catholic faith.

“The seeds are planted and you never know when they will take root,” said Mike.

Mike has fond memories of his own days at St. Mary. He recalls the tradition of standing up as a sign of respect when someone entered the classroom. He later attended the local public high school and felt his manners, values, morals and academics were greatly influenced by the Catholic education he received.

While some things about St. Mary School have changed during its 125-year life span, the heart of the school and its mission have remained the same: to prepare students spiritually, socially and academically for life beyond its doors.

The slogan for St. Mary School's 125-year anniversary celebrated during 2008, “Christ the same, Yesterday, Today and Forever,” (Hebrews 13:8) clearly speaks about the school's commitment to educating past generations of children and will no doubt serve future generations of students for many years to come. ☩

St. Mary continues to play a significant role in their lives. Mike works as the chief maintenance person at St. Mary Parish and School, where the students affectionately call him “Mr. Mike”.

“It is a great environment to work in. I get to help people out. It is more than a job, it is like a ministry,” Mike said. “I feel like I have always been guided.”

When asked about his parents, Mike said, “They have always been very supportive.” He adds, “Certain people come into my life and I call them saints.”

Mike's son, Matthew, also attended St. Mary through the fifth grade. Matthew continues to be an altar server at St. Mary Church. And Mike is grateful that Matthew's formative years