

## Honoring history of long-gone Madonna High School in Aurora a labor of love

By Denise Crosby, Aurora Beacon-News

The assignment was a fun one - it came with lots of stories and certainly lots of enthusiasm.

It was also tough: Get a room full of Madonna alumni together – especially a group working on a historical archive of this once thriving Catholic high school in Aurora – and the conversation comes at rapid-fire speed, at times too quickly for my note-taking abilities.

But then, that's kind of the point.

There's so much to compile, so much to document, so much to share about Madonna that, until it merged in 1968 with an all-male school to become Aurora Central Catholic High School, was such a vibrant part of this community.

Roncalli was the Christian Brothers boys school that also went away, but likely you have never heard that name as it was only in existence a few years before the merger.



From left, Kris Fox-Kellogg, Terri Gaudio, Jean Hilger, Margie Logman, Rosemary Hauser and Barbara Edwards meet on a regular basis at Aurora Central Catholic High School to go through the many boxes and files that chronicle the history of Madonna High School in Aurora, which closed in 1968. (Denise Crosby/The Beacon-News)

Madonna, on the other hand, was a household name in these parts, with its stellar reputation for high-quality education and a hefty enrollment of around 600 students in the building at the corner of Root Street and College Avenue, now home of East Aurora School District 131's Fred Rodgers Academy.

So it took the brunt of this decision by the Rockford Diocese to create a co-ed Catholic high school. But it really all came down to location, say the women working on this project. Roncalli, located at where Cowherd Middle School is now and established around the same time as Rosary High School, was much closer to Madonna, which after the merger became the first home of ACC.

No doubt there was also politics involved, say the former students. These amateur archivists include Margie Logman, a 1966 graduate who became the driving force behind this project in the spring of 2022 after realizing her alma mater was the "only school not recorded at the Aurora Public Library," and "yet is so tied to the history of Aurora."

Just glancing at some of the photos of graduating classes bear out this claim: Jungles, Hanks, Wilkerson, Hettinger, Ruddy, Modaff, and the late Tom Weisner's sisters, aunts and cousins, as well as his wife Marilyn.

And so, in the spring of 2022, Logman and Rosemary Hauser, class of '67, began going through a large metal cabinet in an ACC conference room, where they found a treasure trove of files, photos, news articles and detailed documents dating back to 1924. That's when Bishop Peter Muldoon began meeting with eight Aurora parish leaders with the intent of expanding Catholic education in the city.

Those meetings – and yes, there was also plenty of politics involved – led to the formation of Marmion Military Academy, run by the Benedictine monks, and Madonna, run by the Milwaukee-based Sisters of St. Francis, who purchased the land at the corner of Root Street and College Avenue for the school, as well as the convent, which is now Wayside Cross' Lifespring Ministries.

For the next 40 years those nuns ruled with an iron fist and a soft heart.

It was when recalling memories of their teachers that this group became most animated. "Brilliant" was the first word that came to mind when describing the staff of 20 or so, all wearing black habits and many not a whole lot older than the students themselves.

"They held us to task," insisted Barbara Michels Edwards, class of '67. "Every department was rock solid," from business to language to math and science to the fine arts. "When we would go off to college, we realized what we knew was far beyond most of our other classmates ... it was asked and it was expected."

Those expectations, however, were delivered with kindness and with grace, said Terri Kinnally Gaudio, class of '63, which earned the respect of students, even more so when looking back on how Madonna influenced their lives.

At a time when girls were used to playing more subordinate roles, “those nuns made us all take on leadership roles,” noted Rosemary Niles Hauser, class of '67, who like the others had plenty of stories about those teachers, including Sister Therese, who led such a first-rate business department that area corporations frequently went straight to Madonna when recruiting new hires.

Or the ever-smiling Sister Grace, who spoke many languages and whose journey from China was chronicled in her autobiography. Or art teacher Sister Ansilion, who carved the Virgin Mary statue that still sits in a place of honor in the lobby of ACC. Or Sister Cyriaca, principal during the '60s who made it possible for some students to travel to downtown Chicago to take enrichment classes at Illinois Institute of Technology or DePaul University.

Of course one memory would lead to even more stories: climbing onto the school roof, eating lunches on the graveyard tombstones next door, the infamous “stop and drop” commands from nuns to check on skirt lengths. In fact, so many were shared in the two hours I spent with this group Monday morning, little archiving was completed.

But is there anything wrong with coming for the work and staying for the memories?

For Jean Schindlbeck Hilger, class of '63 who retired from a career in nursing a few years ago at age 75, the surprise has been “how many things there are and how far back they go,” as well as “seeing the connections” of so many Aurora families.

So far all of the material – and because those nuns were so meticulous, there is plenty of it – has been sorted into categories. Scrapbooks have been dismantled, copied and added to a thumb drive, and photos have been sorted by decades, said Logman, who is eyeing the multi-class Madonna reunion on Sept. 10 at ACC.

But help and suggestions are still needed for the many documents, notes, playbills and school newspapers. There are also more documents in Milwaukee with the Sisters of St. Francis that can also be mined. And icing on the cake would be to include audio recordings of some of the those precious memories that helped shape the lives of former students.

There is no timeline for the project's completion. But as these women well know, the last graduates celebrated their 50th reunions years ago, so the clock is certainly ticking.

“The task seems overwhelming at times,” said Logman, “but we consider this a journey more than a burden.”

*dcrosby@tribpub.com*