

Oscar Garcia recalls years as St. Joseph student

Brownsville resident Oscar Garcia began attending St. Joseph Academy in the 1950s as a kindergarten student, and he continued studying there until he graduated in 1962. He recalls that Spanish was the language spoken in his home, and he began kindergarten without knowing any English. In his kindergarten year, he began learning English, and by the next year when he entered the first grade, he had a fairly good understanding of the language. He continued speaking Spanish at home and English at school. Oscar attended classes at the Elizabeth Street location for about eight or nine years, and he has good memories of those years. Even though many felt that the facilities had become inadequate, due to a larger enrollment, Oscar's memories are that he felt the facilities for his classes and student activities were more than adequate. All of Oscar's teachers from kindergarten to fifth grade were sisters. After sixth grade, instruction came from brothers. Memorable teachers for Oscar included Sister Eulalia. He remembers her as small but very well respected because of the manner in which she disciplined the boys. When the boys were caught misbehaving, she would pull out a long switch. Depending on the nature of the infraction, she would swat the boys on their outstretched hands; either knuckles up or knuckles down. Oscar recalls that "knuckles up" hurt more.

He also remembers Brother Louis, who taught him in the sixth grade. He admired Brother Louis because he was always very nice and seemed to love teaching the boys. He said Brother Louis was the type of person you wanted to grow up to become yourself.

He also remembered Brother Thomas, his ninth grade teacher. By that time, the school had acquired property near Palm Boulevard and built a football field. It was Brother Thomas who drove the boys to Canales Field for football practice in an old Navy surplus truck. The truck had a large bed in the back with rails, where the boys all piled in to be transported to the new field for practice.

Another memory for Oscar was being taught by brothers from New York. To this day, he recalls how the boys were shocked to see one of the New York brothers, Brother Stanislaus, smoking. All in all, Oscar remembers being taught by good teachers regardless of where they came from; dedicated to giving the boys the foundation of a strong Catholic education.

Every day at St. Joseph began with a prayer and catechism, and on special holy days they prayed the rosary. He also remembers praying for the conversion of Russia. So when Russia eventually toppled its communist government, the St. Joe boys were convinced it was their prayers that caused Russia's eventual downfall.

He also recalls that, when the move was made in 1959 to the new property, the faculty and students did most of the work, moving furniture and equipment to the new location and even planting many of the trees. Everyone felt very proud to be helping to build the new campus.

Oscar credits his football coach, Coach Gus Zavaletta, with helping shape his life. He remembers the time that Coach Gus found out that some of his football players had gone across the river to Matamoros to have a bit of fun. For a week, they felt the sting of his discipline on the practice field. He never revealed to them how he knew of their transgression, but years later, one of their friends confessed having been the snitch because the friend, Joe Guerra, hadn't been invited to join them. Oscar credits Coach Gus Zavaletta with helping guide his path because he helped him and many other young men understand that a life was not to be taken for granted; that each of their lives was important and that it was their responsibility to always use their lives for good. One of Coach Zavaletta's favorite sayings was, "Good, better, best; never let it rest; until your good gets better and

your better gets best.”

Friendships established during those St. Joe days have lasted a lifetime. To this day, Oscar joins his St. Joe friends for coffee or lunch almost daily.

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