

Enrollment increases in 1970s at St. Joseph

A recent article described the decision for St. Joseph Academy to go co-educational and about the admission of the first class of girl students in 1971. The enrollment in 1970, before admitting girl students, was 292. This increased to 325 in 1971 after girls were admitted and continued to increase through the 1970s, reaching a high of 536 students in 1979.

Brother Francis Garza, a native of Brownsville, was a 1948 graduate of St. Joseph. During his junior year, he spoke to his principal, Brother William Vessels, about the idea of studying to become a brother, and he was encouraged to do so. He made the decision to follow this calling, and he spent two years studying in the Marist Novitiate near Boston, then attended the Marist College in Poughkeepsie, N. Y., graduating in 1963. After that, he served for four years in different locations in New York City and New Jersey before returning to St. Joseph in 1967. He joined the faculty, teaching chemistry, physics, mathematics and religion. He also served four years as athletic director.

Brother Francis was appointed principal in the spring of 1971, soon after the first group of girls had entered St. Joseph. Both faculty and parents felt this was a positive move, and Brother Francis recalls that the male students were enthusiastic about it.

Going co-educational brought several significant changes: an increase in the enrollment, an increase in revenue, and an increase in faculty, both male and female teachers. In earlier years, all teachers had been Marist Brothers, with the exception of Coach Gus Zavaletta. In 1970, the faculty was made up of 12 brothers and one lay teacher. As the years went by, many of the additional faculty were lay teachers because there were longer enough brothers available to fill the needs. The number of brothers has continued to decline, and in 2014 there are only two brothers on the faculty, with two more in administrative and supervisory roles.

The use of lay teachers was more costly than using brothers as teachers, but at the same time the lay teachers at St. Joseph are dedicated to teaching there, even though the pay is less than in the public school system.

The increase in revenue helped provide funding for retiring the loan that had been taken out in 1959 when the new campus was built. Brother Francis Garza was principal during some of those years, and he had responsibility for seeing that the loan payments were met. He recalls that this was a challenging responsibility at times.

Brother Francis also recalls that during his years as principal he was responsible for scheduling, discipline, fund raising, public relations and overall management of the school. And he recalls, with a smile, that on Saturday he would cut the lawn.

In 1979, Brother Pat Lally was appointed to serve as assistant principal, which lessened the responsibilities of Brother Francis.

The buildings at St. Joseph were air conditioned in 1976. A local man, Russell Harwood, along with his wife and St. Joseph board members, assisted in raising funds to install the air conditioning system, which was done by the John H. and Earl Hunter Company. Funds were also raised to convert the existing residential quarters of the brothers to classrooms, work done by the Gloor Building Company.

An eight bedroom house was built for the brothers on the southwest part of the campus. The school chapel was renovated and air conditioned, the library was enlarged, three guidance offices were added and the girls shower room was enlarged.

One group that supported the programs and activities during those years was the Parents Club. Serving as president during 1970 were Mr. and Mrs. H. E. "Gene" McNair.

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