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'MIRACLE' WILL REVIVE 6 CATHOLIC SCHOOLS DONATIONS PLANT INNER-CITY SEED, TUITION AID

By Nicky Robertshaw

At St. Augustine Elementary School in Whitehaven, which reopened in August after being closed for nearly five years, 27 uniformed kindergartners from the surrounding neighborhood gather to learn about math and phonics in two brightly furnished classrooms.

They represent the first step in the Catholic Diocese of Memphis' bold program to reopen six shuttered Catholic schools during the next few years. The move, spearheaded by Bishop J. Terry Steib, is being made possible by a multimillion-dollar anonymous donation, plus additional funding from the Assisi Foundation of Memphis, Inc., and other donors.

"We haven't been able to learn of any other school system in the country that has closed schools and reopened them again," says Sally Hermsdorfer, assistant superintendent for educational expansion for the Catholic Diocese of Memphis.

As the hands-on manager at St. Augustine, Hermsdorfer does everything from planning to teaching, and even cleaning when that's what's needed. Next fall the diocese plans to open two additional schools: Blessed Sacrament, which closed nine years ago, and St. Joseph, which closed 10 years ago.

Next in line are St. John and St. Therese, which are slated to reopen for the 2001-2002 school year. Both have been closed for 15 years. The sixth and final school, Holy Names, has been closed for 30 years and will reopen in 2002.

All six schools are starting with kindergarten only, and adding one grade per year, says Mary McDonald, superintendent of Catholic schools.

"It's exciting and it's challenging," she says.

The fact that this is taking place in Memphis is all the more unusual since Memphis' population is just 6% Roman Catholic, compared with cities with populations that are 50%-60% Catholic, McDonald says.

More than 7,000 students attend the city's 19 Catholic schools, and about 70% of these students are not Catholic.

"We don't educate because they are Catholic," McDonald says. "We educate because we are, and education is a mission of our church."

The six schools are dubbed the Jubilee schools and are being bankrolled by the Jubilee 2000 Schools and Scholarship Fund. Both derive their name from their timing around the year 2000, the Jubilee of the Catholic Church, she says.

From a financial standpoint, the diocese's big challenge is raising \$3 million to match the \$1 million in seed money that's being contributed by the Assisi Foundation.

The foundation announced in November it was giving \$2 million to the effort to reopen the six schools, with \$1 million going immediately for scholarships and \$1 million contingent on raising a \$3 million match. In addition, anonymous donors have provided a multimillion-dollar gift for reopening the schools.

During the next decade or so, as more of the schools open and add more grades, the need for teachers will grow. Yet teachers are in short supply, and parochial schools face the challenge of competing with public school systems that provide better salaries and benefits.

McDonald believes that teacher salaries at Catholic schools are competitive with those at other religious, private schools. Nonetheless, the diocese is spreading the worldwide about Memphis' unusual expansion and future need for teachers.

The sense of mission that's expected to bring teachers from other states and other countries also is what drew Hermsdorfer to oversee the reopening of the first Memphis Jubilee school, St. Augustine.

She had been teaching high school for 13 years at St. Benedict at Auburndale in Bartlett when McDonald, who was Hermsdorfer's principal before being named superintendent, asked her if she would be willing to take a job with no job description.

"When someone says it's never been done before, that's the kind of thing that gets my interest," says Hermsdorfer, who years ago taught kindergarten and operated a day care center.

She started work in July 1999, only a month or so before students were due to arrive at St. Augustine. The school has two teachers and two teaching assistants.

About a third of the students pay full tuition, while another third receive a grant of \$400-\$600. The remaining third have their tuition paid through grants from Jubilee and the Memphis Opportunity Scholarship Trust.

The poorer the students' family, the larger the grant. About one-fourth of the students are Catholic.

Because this school had been closed only five years and its classrooms in use for the

last three years by a Head Start program, it was the easiest of the six schools to reopen. But the start-up has had its share of snags.

For example, shortly before school was to begin, Hermsdorfer learned that the school would not be able to share the cafeteria on the premises with Head Start, which operates in the other eight classrooms.

Head Start will gradually move out as the school adds grades.

Through a round of telephone tag within MIFA, she unexpectedly found herself speaking to the person in charge of bringing hot meals to day care centers. She arranged for the meals and was able to save the cost of building and staffing a second kitchen to feed 27 children.

Hermsdorfer says she has learned some important lessons to apply to future reopenings, including the cost savings of having meals delivered.

For example, she knows exactly what equipment to buy and what items the classes can do without, as well as the best textbooks.

Importantly, she has learned not to hesitate to ask parents to pitch in.

“Low income level does not translate into low interest in their children’s education,” she says.