

After three decades, NLR principal plans to retire

written by Katie Zakrzewski |



Denise Troutman has seen a lot in 30 years as principal of North Little Rock Catholic Academy.

She's seen the growth of her school community, the merger of two North Little Rock Catholic schools and renovations and construction. She has seen multiple students grow into community leaders, and she's hired many former students as teachers.

In May, at 82 years old, Troutman will retire, but she won't be going far away.

Troutman's dream of going to college took a backseat to raising five children, one of whom, Melody Sharp, is her co-principal this school year.

After attending Immaculate Heart of Mary School in North Little Rock (Marche) as one of two non-Polish students, Troutman graduated from Mount St. Mary Academy in Little Rock in 1960 and joined St. Mary Church in North Little Rock.

Soon, Troutman was married to her late husband, Dennis, and family responsibilities took priority.

"I had five children. There wasn't any possibility of me going to school at that time," Troutman said.

Troutman was volunteering at the former St. Mary School in 1966, before college degrees

were required to teach. While raising her children, Troutman volunteered as an art teacher, volleyball coach, librarian, physical education teacher and playground supervisor. It wasn't until her youngest son, Frank, enrolled in college that Troutman decided to apply too.

Troutman originally wanted to be a nurse when she enrolled at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock in 1982.

"They introduced me to this cat that I was going to have to dissect for a semester. I could not endure the smell of that cat," Troutman recalled with a laugh. "So I switched to education at that time."

Troutman graduated in 1988 and began her teaching career at the age of 45. Troutman then began pursuing theology studies and received her master's degree from Loyola University in New Orleans.

Troutman received an school administrator certificate from the University of Central Arkansas in Conway in 1994. That same year, she was named principal of St. Mary School.

In the past 30 years, Troutman has watched changes in technology, construction, uniforms and name of the school itself.

"Shortly after becoming principal, the superintendent (Sister Henrietta Hockle, OSB) wanted me to get a fax machine. I told her I don't need a fax machine, but she convinced me at that time," Troutman said. "I have no idea how we existed without it. We've gone from having computers in all classrooms to children having their own laptops and cell phones. ... But especially with the science department, technology has broadened the horizons so much for kids, and I notice it every day."

Newer technology helped Troutman and NLRCA navigate the pandemic during the 2020-2021 school year, allowing her to pop into virtual classes and check on student behavior and progress.

Troutman's career has been marked by empathy and understanding.

"The Catholic education system is supposed to be for all children to receive a Catholic education. That was my goal," Troutman said, wiping her eyes. "The children have always been my center point. It's always all about the children — to make them feel loved, secure, safe and also receive the best education that we can possibly give them. I think we do a really good job of that."

In 2007, St. Mary School and St. Patrick School merged to form North Little Rock Catholic Academy, a preK3 through eighth-grade school. In spite of the challenges, Troutman was steadfast in her commitment to her mission: doing whatever it took to help her students.

"We're educating the future citizens of our country," Troutman said. "We want them to be well-rounded. We want them to have the spirituality that the Catholic school system offers."

Many notable alumni have come from St. Mary School and NLRCA.

Tommy Norman, a nationally recognized police officer with the North Little Rock Police Department, graduated from St. Mary School.

“Mrs. Denise Troutman laid the groundwork and created a legacy at NLRCA that will impact the lives of students and their families for years to come,” Norman said.

Several priests, such as Father Martin Siebold of Springdale, Father Greg Luyet of Little Rock and Father Keith Higginbotham of Rogers, spent time in the classrooms at St. Mary School.

“Mrs. Troutman has poured out her life for St. Mary’s parish and school, which became North Little Rock Catholic Academy,” Father Luyet said. “Every time I saw her, she joyfully expressed the love of Jesus Christ and her zeal for the Catholic education of the youth.”

Rachael Berton, pre-kindergarten teacher and former student, credits Troutman with her desire to teach.

“Not all teachers can show what passion they have for teaching, but with Mrs. Troutman, she had so much passion that she made me want to be a teacher,” Berton said. “I think it was one of the best decisions I could have made. I have known Mrs. Troutman since I was 5 years old. To me, she is not only my boss, but she has made me feel as if I’m a part of her family.”

Sharp said she is proud of the legacy her mother has created at “the little school with a big heart.”

“Mrs. Troutman has always been a wonderful example, for my entire family, to follow,” she said. “One of my daughters told me, ‘G-ma is the closest person I know to God.’ That is the life she has and is leading. I see God in her. She has strengthened my path to the Kingdom of God, and shown me that same path for our students.”

Sharp said she is thankful for the guidance her mother has offered in her own teaching career.

“Getting to spend all this time with her has been a blessing,” Sharp said. “Not only the experience of having her to guide me through teaching and now the principal position, but also the beautiful path she follows in Christ, in everything she does, has been invaluable. I know I will look back on this time and feel incredibly blessed that I, selfishly, had all this special time with my mother. She is not only a treasure for this school but also a treasure to me.”

Father Rubén Quinteros, pastor of St. Mary and Immaculate Heart of Mary churches, said Troutman is a pillar in the community.

“We can use thousands of words to express how much Mrs. Troutman will be missed at NLRCA and St. Mary’s,” Father Quinteros said. “She has been a pillar of strength and perseverance for our community. We are called to see Christ in every person, but Mrs. Troutman made it easy and evident for me all these years. She has helped me to be a better priest and a better father to my people. Only in heaven will she know all the lives that she touched through her dedication to our school.”

Even though Troutman is retiring, she’s not going far away. She plans to end her career the same way she started it — volunteering at NLRCA.

“I’ll be here whenever (Sharp) needs me, or when we’re doing reports. I want to keep my thumb on the junior high kids and religion, too,” Troutman said. “I plan on doing that next year and volunteering to help with confirmation and the sacraments.”

In whatever free time Troutman has left, she plans on reading.

“I have a box of books that I’ve collected over the many years that I want to read,” Troutman said. “I want to do a lot of reading.”

Whether she was dressing up as Elvis for school performances, climbing inside the dunking booth for fundraisers or breaking ground on a new project, Troutman said she spent the last 30 years living her dream.

“It’s been a joy. It hasn’t been a job at all,” Troutman said. “It’s all been a joy.”

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