

School fondly remembers longtime principal

Written by Karen Mahoney

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MILWAUKEE — Even after 39 years at the former St. Bernadette School in Milwaukee, Mary Lorusso, principal of Northwest Catholic – West Campus, still searched for ways to excite and reach her students.

Students who might have been a bit shy would eagerly sign up to participate in the annual school plays. Others found their voices by participating in the children's and youth choirs. Countless more discovered their faith by Lorusso's example as a faith-filled Catholic.

To those who knew her hardworking nature, it was no surprise that on an unseasonably warm All Souls Day, Lorusso was home, in her yard, raking leaves.

But what happened next has left her students, colleagues, friends and family stunned.

Lorusso greeted her neighbor and waved to him as he entered his home. When he came back outside, she had collapsed on the lawn.

The 64-year-old, mother of two daughters and grandmother to two, died the next day of a brain aneurysm.

News of her death gripped Northwest Catholic School and St. Bernadette Parish at what is ordinarily an exciting time of the year preparing for Thanksgiving and Advent. Administrative assistant Lana Anderson embraced tearful students in the hallways, while others wondered what life would be like without the most dynamic administrator and teacher they had known. Counselors from Messmer High School came to offer support to the grief-stricken students, and Anne Dunlop was placed as interim principal to ease children and staff through the transition.

"I lost my best friend," said Anderson, who knew Lorusso for 14 years, 11 of those while employed as her assistant. "She was my peanut butter and I was the jelly and now I am flying around with nothing to stick to."

Her voice was deep from the heart, her faith and love of God's people were grounded in justice, fairness and trust, said Fr. Charles Zabler, pastor of Our Lady of Good Hope, one of the three parishes which comprise Northwest Catholic School.

"Her presence was so casual and comfortable," he said. "She gave you this sense of being at home and yet possessed a comfort level that she could be approached and yet was as much a woman of conviction and determination than I have ever seen. She had a strong faith and the kids came first, and let us know that the reason we do everything was for the kids."

When St. Bernadette School merged with St. Catherine of Alexandria and Our Lady of Good Hope to form Northwest Catholic, it was Lorusso who gracefully assisted others through the process while burying her own pain of the consolidation.

"This was excruciatingly painful," said Fr. Zabler. "She had ownership of that school for 39 years. She started as a music teacher and became an administrator. It was hard for her to yield ownership to the tri-parish with a new name, but she did it gracefully."

Among her passions, the most important aspect of her life was instilling a faith-based and faith-valued education in children.

“To her, it wasn’t private education, it was faith education,” Fr. Zabler said. “At her funeral, one of her daughters said, ‘We knew we shared our mom’s love, but we didn’t know we shared it with thousands and thousands over the years.’ That was apparent with the huge number of people who attended her funeral.”

Although he knew her just five years, Fr. Zabler was impressed by Lorusso’s servanthood and availability to anyone who needed her.

“She had a way of being available and present to all things, not overbearing, but as a strong leader,” he said. “She also had the capacity to draw people to take ownership for various things, just as projects, performances, and school itself.”

Despite the changes that accompany uniting parishes and merging schools, the one constant was the cheerful and steadfast principal who served as a reminder of the stability of the past.

“The pastors from all three parishes are relatively new, and the school staff adjusted to accommodate the changes, but through it all, Mary gave the West Campus a sense of continuity,” said Fr. Zabler. “And now we, as a school and parish, have to go on and celebrate our continuity as well.”

When Debbie Hintz, St. Catherine parish director, began working at the parish in 2006, she was amazed to learn that Lorusso had been a cornerstone of St. Bernadette since 1970.

“She was still so wonderfully dedicated to Catholic education and very concerned about children and making sure the children in the area received a good Catholic education,” Hintz said. “After all that time, she had to reapply for her position when the schools merged, and although she was chosen to remain at the St. Bernadette campus, she was willing to do what was best for the school, children and parish communities and worked hard to make the Northwest Catholic a reality.”

The school is part of Milwaukee’s School Choice program and comprises a diverse population of Caucasian, African-American, Indian, Hispanic and Asian students, and Lorusso was proud of this aspect.

“On the Tuesday before she died, she gave a wonderful presentation on Northwest Catholic that was open to any parishioners,” Hintz said. “Everyone was impressed with how well the school was doing and of Mary’s pride and dedication in the school. Losing her is a great loss to St. Bernadette and Northwest Catholic. She was instrumental to bringing it all about and making a good school. I will miss her.”

In addition to separate memorial services at the school, a Mass was offered for Lorusso on Dec. 8, the Feast of the Immaculate Conception.

While ideas for a more formal memorial are undecided, Anderson said the school yearbook will be dedicated to her, and some of the parents are thinking of putting on a play in her honor.

“We have so many ideas, after all, she did those plays for 35 years,” said Anderson. “We have thought about something like having plaques to honor her plays, a bench in the grotto or a Lorusso Avenue street sign erected; we aren’t sure, but we all want to do something for her. This is such a big loss for everyone.”