Gerard: a final dismissal

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In 1962 Gerard Catholic High School's doors opened. Since then, Gerard administrators and teachers have dedicated themselves to the secondary education of more than 2,000 students. This year the doors were shut for good. Pictured here, Gerard's last student body says farewell.

Gerard students receive Communion at a final Mass held May 10 at the school.

Someone scribbled the feelings of many Gerard students, administrators, faculty, and alumni on a window in the school's St. Thomas More Hall.

WRAP UP: 27 years of memories tie Gerard's family

By Teresa Schuelke
Catholic Sun Staff

It's a cliche, but when students were asked what they liked most about Gerard Catholic High School, their answer often was that the student body and faculty are like a family.

Even long-time faculty members admit that the closeness shared by staff and students was one factor that kept them at the school for many years.

Two long-time teachers at Gerard started there because it was "just a job," but their opinions changed.

Twenty-one years ago, Jay Hollar was fresh out of college when he accepted his first teaching position with Gerard. Although the non-Catholic had to make adjustments, like knowing when to stand up and sit down during a school Mass and learning how to distinguish students who dressed alike, the closeness of the community was enough to make him stay.

IT WAS A SIMILAR situation for Marguarite Berges. She applied too late for any open teaching positions at the public schools, so she accepted a job at Gerard — planning only to stay a year or so.

"I liked it so well, I never left," Berges said. "The students are well-behaved, polite and considerate. You can't find that in a public school."

Florence Larkin has been the secretary to the last three principals. She said working at Gerard was a personal thing, since her four children graduated from there.

"I always thought it was a great school," she said. "Working in a small office, we've always worked together and shared."

Al Martinez, who has taken care of the school's maintenance since 1964 and has driven the athletics bus for the last 15 years, said he likes "working with all these wonderful people. It feels just like home."

AND LIKE ALL homes and the families in them, the school has changed over its 27-year history.

Founded in 1962 by the Holy Ghost Fathers, Gerard opened with 143 students entering as freshmen. Each year as another class started, the enrollment would increase considerably. By 1964, the school had 500 students. When the projected student body reached 1,200 in Gerard's fourth year, more classrooms were built.

The school's future looked bright in the 1960s and '70s. In the first yearbook in 1966, Fr. David Marshall, Gerard's first principal, predicted that the school would grow with the Valley. Msgr. Alexander Nanko, who was Gerard's principal between 1970 and 1975, called that period the school's "golden years."

Martinez remembers the early years, when he was one of four full-time workers hired to keep the yards and buildings in order. To get ready for graduation, Martinez said the crew would work the night before the ceremony and set up 1,700 chairs in the main yard. In its last year, with enrollment down and many classrooms closed off, he was the only full-time maintenance employee, and graduation was held at nearby St. Theresa's parish.

ANOTHER DIFFERENCE over the years, according to Larkin, is that the students' dress has become less formal. When the school first opened, boys were required to wear grey slacks, shoes, white shirt, black tie and a red blazer. Girls' uniforms were grey and red skirts, white tapered blouses, saddle shoes and red or grey blazers. Even in the Arizona heat, blazers were mandatory and Berges said the boys would often pull the lining down in their jackets to make them cooler.

In its last few years, Gerard's uniform consisted of grey slacks or skirt and a simple knit polo shirt in the school's colors.

Although he believes students today aren't much different from their predecessors, Hollar said attitudes have changed with the times. He remembers when he first started teaching, the teens had more interest in political and social change. He said students wore armbands in 1969, during an international day of protest against the Vietnam War. Probably the next time Gerard students wore armbands in protest was after the announcement of the school' closing was made in February.

"THERE DOES SEEM to be, perhaps, a greater emphasis on wanting to get an education than in 1968," Hollar said of today's students.

Throughout the years, one of the most significant changes Gerard faced was a declining enrollment. As the area surrounding the school changed from residential to commercial, the enrollment continued to drop. With increasing costs and lack of students, Bishop Thomas J. O'Brien decided to close the school at the end of the 1988-89 term.

Although the school itself will be closed, Gerard's principal, alumni and students stress that the Redcoat spirit will still be around.

"At the end of this school year everyone will go in different directions but the memories and experiences you have from here will never be lost," said Fr. John Hanley, Gerard's principal, during the last student Mass.

Nancy Contadino, alumni director, said the school's alumni will continue to meet and plan activities despite the closing.

As Msgr. Nanko, past principal and pastor at St. Stephen's Byzantine church, put it during the homily at the last baccalaureate Mass held June 3, "A school is not just a building; just like a house doesn't make a home."

Two graduates hug after commencement ceremonies — the last to be held at St. Teresa's Church for Gerard.

The final blessing is given at the school by principal Fr. John Hanley for the final time.

Do you know Redcoat history?

1. What was the name of the priestly order which founded Gerard Catholic High School in 1962?
2. Which three women Religious orders helped the priests open Gerard?
3. In 1966, Gerard held its first prom. Where was it?
4. Besides the pompon girls and the twirlers, what other group performed during half-time activities in 1965?
5. Gerard's school newspaper has had two different names through the years. What are they?
6. When did Gerard first win the Class A state championship in football?
7. Who did they play in the first football state championship and what was the score?
8. How did Gerard students get the nickname of Redcoats?
9. What year did the school's yearbook, *Image*, first appear?
10. Gerard has had seven principals over its 27-year history. Name the principals.

Answers:

1. The Holy Ghost Fathers.
2. Benedictine Sisters, Sisters of the Precious Blood and Sisters of Mercy.
3. The Safari in Scottsdale.
4. The bull whip team.
5. *Trailblazer* and the *Unionjack*.
6. In the fall of 1974.
7. In the '74 championship, Cereal defeated Lake Havasu, 12-10.
8. Students were nicknamed Redcoats because of the red blazers that were part of the school's standard uniform.
9. *Image* first appeared in 1966, four years after the school started.
10. The first four principals were Holy Ghost Fathers; David Marshall, William Kane, John Moran and Clement F. Ladkowsky. Msgr. Alexander Nanko was the first diocesan priest to be principal. Dr. Robert Brandt was the only principal who was not a priest. And Fr. John Hanley has been principal for the last four years.

Brendan Winn, a Gerard senior, captures prom memories on video.

photos by Teresa Schuelke and Nancy Wiechec

Redcoat remnants

By Alumnus Bruce Spotleson

In the 22 years since I graduated from Gerard High School, a career in newspapers has taken me to virtually every region of the United States.

The key to my career was probably the 12 years of Catholic education that sharpened my word skills, spelling and grammar.

I do not remember ever hearing of a Catholic high school with a shop class — although surely there must be one somewhere — but the world of journalism is peppered with parochial school progeny.

They enter the profession from other high schools in other regions, all bringing tales of the uniforms that defined their school's personality and made them unique.

NONE WAS MORE unique than ours. We were the Redcoats. To this day, I have not heard of another school daring to wear the bright red blazers that set us apart as Gerard boys.

Parents were too quick to recognize the benefits of the Catholic school approach to uniforms. My mother still talks about how blazers and gray slacks made for an affordable teen wardrobe. These days, with a second-grader in our own home, my wife and I agree.

Another benefit to the "Gerard look" was that to parents, it was strikingly fashionable given the mod-blazer tastes of the '60s. But best of all from a parents' standpoint was that other adults always knew whose high school principal to call when bad after-school behavior needed to be discussed.

RED BLAZERS DO not exactly allow for incognito behavior.

There were a few drawbacks to the red blazer, I suppose, but you know what time does to the memory. It makes things seem more pleasant. But actually, one thing does stand out in my memory.

It was the competition other schools seemed to feel with us. With Bourgade, it was a natural rivalry — two schools built on identical floor plans at opposite ends of the Valley. But I could never really figure out why other schools seemed to play so much harder on the football field or basketball court when the opponent was us, the Redcoats.

I am to this day uncertain as to whether it was their disregard for the fashion statement we were making, or the choice of mascot and nickname that made them think we were fans of the old British Army.

THE REDCOATS? What red-blooded American boy could not help but want to tackle us?

This, of course, only helped serve to unite us, and to build a level of school spirit that was probably a little above that of the average secondary school. And it's still there. My last two high school reunions were truly warm experiences.

(By the way, I'm in charge of the next one. What will it be like without a base of operations?)

At Gerard, we had classrooms, but in the old days, never a home field advantage. That's because we didn't have a field. When we were lucky, we got to at least play our home basketball games in the St. Mary's gym, which was probably a little more accessible to Our Lady of Victory than the public-school alternative.

IN THE PAST decade, Gerard added its own football field.

I went to a game there. It was fun, although I could never really get used to a football field on the campus. Funny, huh?

Actually, to me, the highlight of Gerard athletics will always be our football teams's 7-6 victory over unbeaten Agua Fria in 1966, when Jim Larkin (another journalist, now president of *New Times*) quarterbacked us to a share of the Class A state title.

We were only the second class at Gerard, and we had done something big in our senior year. Real pride.

It was much bigger to me than it now seems, I guess. I do not know if it will get bigger or smaller when Gerard closes.

A lot of the kids at Gerard came from miles away, like the busload that arrived every morning from Mount Carmel in Tempe. But I was fortunate to live right in the immediate neighborhood.

THAT MEANT I got to watch Gerard being built at the same time the huge new Thomas Mall was going up. And I got to see them both in their prime. When Thomas Mall was new, there were all sorts of fancy birds and fish on display. At Gerard, we had a pretty fancy intercom that allowed full communication with the principal's office, and a multi-purpose room that with imagination could be turned into virtually anything inside an afternoon.

There was so much that was new at the school. There was even a new order of clergy — well, at least they were new to me.

I was introduced to the Holy Ghost Fathers, and they to me, in one of the more fragile environments there can be, a homeroom full of teenage boys.

We had been told that the Holy Ghost order had previously focused on missionary work, sometimes going to the more remote corners of the globe to teach and baptize. At Gerard, they learned from us as much as we did from them. I suppose the suburban Phoenix environment had its similarities with the deepest parts of Africa. Certainly high school boys have their uncivilized moments.

WE WERE OUT of high school before anyone really knew it. After graduation, things changed. Some of us didn't see a barber again until the mid-'70s. And Thomas Mall, well, it gave way to newer shopping centers too. Last time I was there, I couldn't recognize the old place.

If part of the success of a Catholic high school is measured by the careers of its graduates, then Gerard can be considered a success. I'm generally impressed with what its graduates have accomplished, not just in my own class but in other classes that followed. I would think that graduate-for-graduate, Gerard High would compare well with any school anywhere.

And if you throw in the red coats, we'd win hands down.

Bruce Spotleson is president of Cape Cod Newspapers of South Yarmouth, Mass. He lists among his major accomplishments the fact that he was named "Most Witty Boy" of the 1967 Gerard graduating class.

'God bless all our honest efforts Though the way be hard'

Gerard's Alma Mater

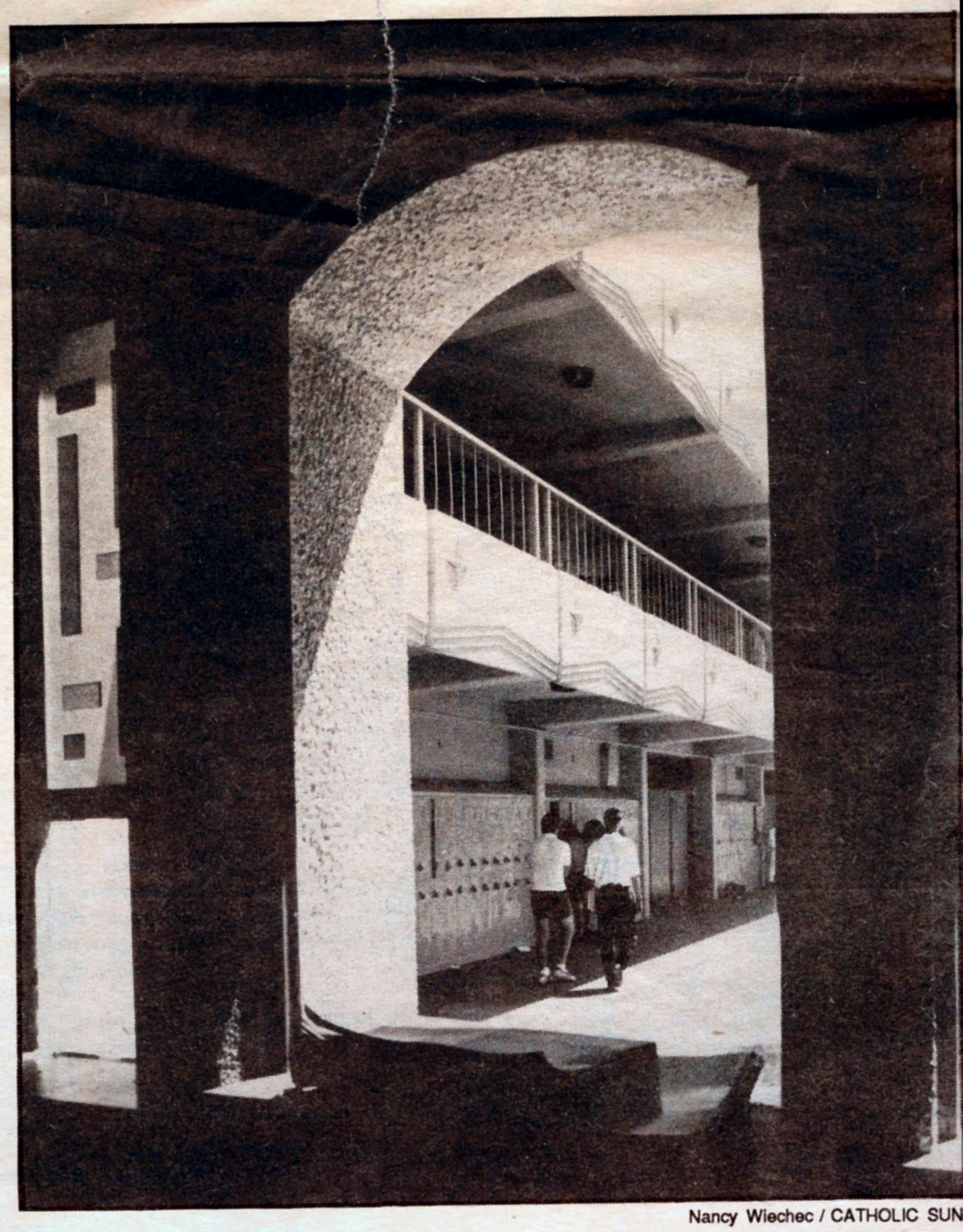
Have you heard the Phoenix legend
Sung by every bard
Of the glory and the triumph
Of our school — Gerard?

Founded in the desert wasteland,
Burnt by tropic sun,
It has risen from the ashes
Of a hard fought battle won.

Now its hopes and aspirations
Far transcend the strife.
It has lasted; it has prospered,
"The Spirit giveth life."

God bless all our honest efforts
Though the way be hard.
May we always be forever
Firmly united, strong together.

May we issue to thy glory.
Hail to thee, Gerard!



Nancy Wiechec / CATHOLIC SUN