

New principals had unusual first years

LAKE CHARLES – Beginning a new job is always challenging, particularly when the position finds you as the leader of large staff of professionals who look to you for guidance. Add to that the fact that you have never done this kind of job before. Last August, Kathleen Dorsey Bellow and Trish Trejo faced just such pressure on the first day of school as new principals of Catholic schools in the Diocese of Lake Charles.

Bellow had taken over the leadership role at Sacred Heart Katharine Drexel Catholic School while Trejo was the first-year principal at St. Theodore Holy Family School in Moss Bluff.

Both had definite ideas of how they wanted their first months of the new job to go. Both had particular items on their "To Do" lists. But neither could have foreseen the visitors who came August 29 and September 24 – hurricane's Katrina and Rita – and how those two disasters would change their plans.

Both came to their positions from interesting directions.

"It was very difficult to envision in the beginning," Bellow said. "My focus had been on liturgy. That is what I thought I was called to do and that is what I thought I would end up doing in some capacity."

Bellow has a Doctor of Ministry degree from the Catholic Theological Union in Chicago and she also holds a Masters degree in Theology from the Institute for Black Catholic Studies at Xavier University in New Orleans.

"Then this job offer came out of the blue and I moved ahead mostly on faith," she continued. "I looked at the job description. I had a friend who was a principal in a Catholic school setting, I went to training for principals in a Catholic school setting, and I have worked in a Catholic school, so I had some idea of what a Catholic school principal did."

For Trejo, who had been a teacher in both public and Catholic schools and held a Masters degree through the Loyola Institute for Ministry Extension (LIMEX) Program, the suggestion of being a principal came to her on a trip to Poland commemorating the 60th anniversary of the liberation of the Auschwitz concentration camp.

"One of the teachers from Holy Family, Monica Core, was with me on the trip," Trejo said. "The whole time we were on the trip she was talking about the school, how great it was, and how they needed a principal. She found out I had this degree in parish life and administration and told me I should really think about it, come check out the school, and think about applying as principal."

"I was perfectly happy to stay in my classroom (teaching religion at St. Louis Catholic High School) and do what I was doing," she continued. "It never occurred to me before then, at all, that I might be a principal of a school. So I told her I would come and I did. There was something about the place, when I walked in here and started meeting people. There was something that really appealed to me."

For both women family played a large role in the decision to take their respective positions.

"After visiting, that's when I talked to my husband and really prayed about it and decided that I would apply," Trejo said. "I became very emotionally involved in wanting the job by then, I really, really did and it has been a big thrill."

It was Bellow's son, Justin, who put the concept of being a Catholic school principal into the proper perspective.

"My son helped me see when he said, 'You know Mom, in a Catholic school you have liturgy in the morning, morning prayer, prayer at the end of the day, you could do liturgy all day long.'"

"That helped me then to see the job as a principal in a different light, to understand that when we talk about formation of Christian disciples that Catholic schools are a really good place to be involved and here I am."

Not a native of Southwest Louisiana, she had come to the area after her marriage to Paul Bellow and became an extremely active parishioner at Immaculate Heart of Mary.

"I had been educated in Catholic schools all the way through college and thought I had an idea of what faith was about," Bellow said. "But working with the people of Immaculate Heart of Mary, who took me under their wing, I really got a practical everyday understanding of what Christian discipleship was and that led me to become very involved in the ministry of liturgy."

Both women had great plans when the school year began.

"I had some notion but they were not very clear in my mind at least not until I sat with my faculty and talked with them about things they wanted to see in their school – the strengths and weaknesses that they identified in the program," Bellow said. "That helped clarify a vision of the job for me. I sat and talked with students before I began the

"We were just getting into the rhythm of our new students and how we were going to do that when Rita came," Trejo said. "That was another big shock. I had to come up with quick evacuation plan, what to take with us, how do we stay in touch with each other after the storm. I put together this list of phone numbers so that they (the faculty and staff) could reach me and I could reach them. I guess 48 hours after the storm I knew at least where everybody was and they were safe. Then we started trying to figure out how to go on from there."

Rita did some damage at Holy Family, the original structure that had housed the school.

"We had a building that was badly damaged but thank goodness for the parish," Trejo said. "They helped a lot dealing with and sorting through insurance and FEMA and everything."

At Sacred Heart Saint Katharine Drexel the devastation was extensive. It forced the elementary grades to move the former site of

look forward to their "sophomore" years in Catholic school administration.

"This year was just a "look-see" year," Bellow said. "You come and you see things that need to change, things that need to be strengthened, things that need to be promoted. But in a first year I believe you have to respect what's there and you have to learn. For me, this year was mostly taking notes and getting a better sense of the school's strengths, weaknesses and areas of opportunities to grow."

"As I look forward to next year one of the things I would like to better define is our Black and Catholic identity, so that the community can use us as a resource," Bellow continued. "God has given us unique and particular gifts to give to the celebration of our Catholic faith that we can certainly build upon in a Catholic school setting. The sharpening of our cultural identity is very important to me."

For Trejo, her list from last year has been revised.

"I did revisit the things I was looking for at the beginning of that first year," Trejo said. "I had to revise them because I have learned a great deal, not just from the hurricane but from being an administrator for a year. I've learned from the teachers, gotten feedback from them. When I first met them I wanted to know how do you see yourself. I wanted to hear from them what they see as important. Later on I wanted to know how do you think it's going? What are we doing right and what are we doing wrong? Then at the end of the year, I asked them to tell me what they felt my strengths and weaknesses were, what opportunities did we have for the future, all of those things."

"I have taken all of that feedback and tried to build a new plan," she continued. "Some of it comes from that old plan and some of it is brand new. Gathering all that data and hoping we have the opportunity to work on that."

Both principals took a very bad situation at the beginning of their new jobs and kept their schools afloat and worked very hard to make sure the students received the kind of education they were paying for.

"The key to all of this was that if I hadn't had so many wonderful people in place that already knew the school, I couldn't have done it," Trejo said. "Everyone was absolutely superb. Whether it was being patient with Katrina families or trying to sort out what to do next, evacuation and all those things. The teachers that had their own stress in their lives, some of them and their families had lost so much, they were coming to school everyday and welcoming these children as if nothing had happened."

For Bellow, this year is all about improvement.

"We have already looked at ways of improving our curriculum so there is a much greater connection between the elementary grades and the teachers in the junior high," she said. "I know I made a lot of mistakes in my first year. One approach in ministry for me is the team approach, working in collaboration. I know my limitations and I know that when I partner up with people who are different, who have different missions, different visions, and different skills that whatever we do together is a much better product than what I could have produced by myself."



Kathleen Dorsey Bellow



Trish Trejo

job to see what they wanted in the school and they gave me some very definite ideas of what they wanted Sacred Heart Saint Katharine Drexel to be."

For Trejo, any plans she had for the school were stymied when Katrina hit New Orleans.

"I had this whole list of things I wanted to do as I began July first and I was in the midst of working on them, doing classroom visits and the like, and Katrina came," Trejo said. "It was only a day or two after Katrina that I started getting phone calls from families in New Orleans – what's your school like, do you have any openings, can we bring our kids there?"

"And, then they started coming into my office," she continued. "There was no way you could spend a little time with them because they were heartbroken, they were lost, they didn't know what they were going to do next. These were families who had probably, since their children were born, planned what Catholic school their kids were going to go to. They had shopped around, had really invested time and money in that decision and now they were lost again and having to start over."

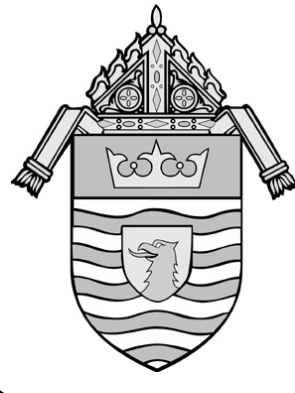
"So, as I started spending time with those families, sometimes that was all I would do," she said. "From the time I arrived in the morning until I left I was helping Katrina families coming in and out of my office. We ended up with 30 Katrina students who actually enrolled and then several other families who talked us but in the end decided to move on to another town or for whatever reason didn't end up staying."

Immaculate Heart of Mary School on North Cherry Street. "Immaculate Heart has been very generous in letting us use their former school and to have the church right across the street to have Mass there," Bellow said.

"Rita has provided us, out of all the devastation, an opportunity for a new beginning with our physical plant," she continued. "We have had to gut the building to the 2x4 studs, and we will be able to upgrade our facilities. We are going to build in as much as possible in modern technology."

"What we had is a 1920 building," Bellow continued. "In terms of amenities we will have central air and heat and we will be able to wire the building for anything that is important in school technology these days. We may not be able to do the end product right away, but things will be available when we are able to have the hardware. The building will be a safer building."

With the beginning of school little more than two weeks away, the two principals



OFFICIAL APPOINTMENT

The Reverend Msgr. Harry D. Greig, Diocesan Administrator, makes the following appointment, effective August 1, 2006, based upon the recommendation of The Very Reverend Joseph G. Gachand, M.S., Vicar Provincial: The Reverend Ernest J. Corriveau, M.S. is appointed Parochial Vicar of Our Lady of Prompt Succor Church, Sulphur, La.



More than \$800,000 worth of disaster relief supplies have been shuttled through the warehouse used by Relief Effort for Catholic Social Services (RECSS) of the Diocese of Lake Charles following Hurricane Rita. These supplies which were contributed through Second Harvest and by many different groups from across the United States. Recently the last of those supplies, which have aided thousands of people through dozens of churches and other relief agencies throughout Southwest Louisiana, were contributed to the Greater St. Mary Baptist Church Relief Center for current and future relief efforts in the community.

Proud 2B Catholic Music Festival set for August 19

SULPHUR – The Proud 2B Catholic Music Festival, sponsored by the Diocese of Lake Charles, will be held Saturday, Aug. 19, on the Sulphur Freshman High School campus from 1 p.m. to 9:30 p.m. Doors open at noon.

The all-day festival is more than a concert. It is a faith-filled event for the entire family, featuring Mass, Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament (from 9-9:30 p.m. on the main stage), an opportunity for Confession, motivational speakers, ministry talks, and performances by some of the best international Christian recording artists. There will also be inflatable games, Catholic product vendors, and food concessions. The Proud 2B Catholic Music Festival is an

event with youth in mind but is open to all ages and faith traditions.

A variety of Christian music will be performed by artists such as Aaron Thompson, Righteous B, Sean Forrest, Josh Blakesley, and Cooper Ray. Up-and-coming local artists include Clay Vessel, Unleavened, Zealous, Nichole Ackoury, and others. Brian Butler, Cooper Ray, and Sean Forrest are among the keynote speakers as well as Colin McIver of Dumb Ox Productions. Butler will be providing two talks, including one on Theology of the Body while McIver will present one talk and provide music ministry on the event's second stage.

Over 3000 people from Louisiana and other Southern states are expected to attend this inaugural.

Tickets may be purchased by calling Caroline Dupre at 337-439-7426, Ext. 11, or onlineatwww.proud2bcatholic.com/sulphur.php.

Advance ticket price is Individual - \$20, groups of 6 or more - \$15; groups of 21 or more - \$10; Seniors - \$15; and 12 and under - free with adult admission. Tickets will be priced higher the day of the event.

For more information about this event, please contact Milissa Thibodeaux with Diocese of Lake Charles 337-912-4546 or milissa.thibodeaux@lcediocese.org

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