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For 71 years, Sister Kathleen has been sharing faith and wisdom in the classroom

BY ANA VECIANA-SUAREZ
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Sister Kathleen Donnelly, the longest serving school principal in the Archdiocese of Miami, started teaching in the middle of the Great Depression -- before television, before cellphones, before computers. She was 17 years old.

"It was a great adventure, very exciting," she recalls. "I felt right at home."

Seventy-one years later, Sister Kathleen is still right at home on her adventure. Every morning the nun who was Old School before Old School became fashionable is at St. Hugh Catholic School sharing wisdom, instilling discipline and greeting her students by their first name when they pass her in the halls.

Since 1974, when she was asked to take over as principal of the Coconut Grove institution, the Adrian Dominican nun has shepherded her wards with a clear eye, a firm hand and a generous heart. Educational fads have come and gone, technology has invaded the classroom and social revolution has transformed families, but Sister Kathleen has

stayed true to her mission, one that goes beyond book-learning.

"I want them to leave here with a sense of faith and knowledge of who they are," she says of her students. "Too many want to be famous and they think this will satisfy them. I want them to be themselves, to feel good about who they are. I want them to have a goal, their own goal, and not let anyone detour them from it."

That sense -- and pride -- of self is evident in the way the students dress, speak, study and behave toward their teachers and each other. In this leafy elementary/middle school, manners still count. Uniformed children -- shirts tucked, shoes shined, ponytails in order -- greet visitors with a smile and a hearty good morning. They stand when called on. Left alone in a classroom they remain church-mouse quiet.

When the art teacher distributes supplies to the center of a work table one morning, Sister Kathleen admonishes a boy who reaches out for them without thinking about his tablemates first. This is not appropriate behavior for a good Catholic boy. "Remember," she says in a tone no one dares question, "ladies first."

Seventh-grade teacher Madeline S. Timmis, who has been at the school 30 years, describes a boss who is both generous and detail-oriented. The nun, Timmis says, hands out birthday ribbons daily and rewards worthy students with an ice cream treat at lunch. She has been known to give a pizza party for a class that has performed a particularly good deed for others in the community.



Sister Kathleen Donnelly has been principal at St. Hugh Catholic School in Coconut Grove since 1974. Her students love her. \n

Miami Herald Staff

Sister Kathleen, age 87, still rules at St. Hugh's

Photos

"She allows others to grow by respecting the potential and intellect each of us possesses," Timmis adds. "Her generosity towards even the smallest of the students is remarkable."

Nonetheless, the rules at St. Hugh are clear-cut and the assumption is that everyone will follow them. In a world growing ever more crass, it is an environment parents appreciate.

"The school has incredible discipline because of her," says Jackie Alvarez-Gautney, mother of a sixth grader and an alumna who still remembers her principal's strictures from back in the day. "She has a way of getting her message without raising her voice. She doesn't roll around with those trends."

Parent Liliana Villanueva says her eldest, Liliana Carolina, penned a college application essay about the nun when she was asked to write about an influential person in her life. "She has seen so much, lived so much, that she realizes what is important and what needs to change," Villanueva adds. "But she also recognizes what should stay the same."

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