

Girls Catholic Central High School - Detroit

By Aundra Willis, Class of 1962



In September 1893, four IHM Sisters opened St. Patrick School, at Cathedral Parish in Detroit. After several years as St. Patrick's Grade School, and Saints Peter and Paul Academy, the building was renamed Catholic Central High School for Girls and converted into a high school curriculum in 1927.

Located on a quiet side-street in mid-town Detroit, the three-story school building's Gothic Revival structure was in keeping with the sounds coming from nearby Orchestra Hall as the Detroit Symphony Orchestra rehearsed. Familiar symphonies and classical works by famous composers inadvertently provided accompaniment to afternoon classes.

A rigorous entrance exam and application process ensured that students would be able to succeed in the strict academic program. Although the student body was predominantly white for many years, the social changes of the late 1950s and early '60s began to bring about the enrollment of a small number of students of color. Thereafter, diverse young women of all nationalities assimilated comfortably, forming strong bonds of friendship. The interactions and developing camaraderie paved the way to academic success for many.

The school maintained a low student-teacher ratio, ensuring a maximum of 300 girls. Students' families shared the ideals and mission of Girls' Catholic Central (GCC), which gave the faculty strong support; deeply religious values accompanied the academic program. Students attended Mass at the Chapel of St. Theresa-the Little Flower at the start of each school day and had the option of attending Confession weekly.

GCC enforced a strict high standard of dress code. With the exception of wrist watches, jewelry was not acceptable, and the faculty carefully scrutinized make-up and hair styles. The standard uniform was navy blue blazer, white cotton blouse and navy blue pleated skirt (skirt length below the knee, and preferably mid-calf) with white socks and lace-up walking shoes or loafers. The dress code was relaxed a bit on the first Fridays of the month, when students could wear modest, tasteful clothing other than their uniforms.



Students participated in annual three-day retreats to reflect in prayer and solitude and penance, and to enhance their Catholic faith. Total silence was required, and with few exceptions, there was no interaction among the student body during retreats. Students were encouraged to contemplate their lives in a manner reminiscent of the 40 days Christ spent alone in the desert and to envision their future as good Catholic wives and mothers.

Some of GCC's traditions included freshmen initiation. At the start of the school year, seniors became "big sisters" to incoming freshmen for the initiation period. Subservient freshmen received a list of orders created to enforce total acquiescence to seniors' whims. Harmless pranks such as silly hairstyles and wearing clothes inside out resulted in a focus on "promoting school spirit."

Another cherished tradition was Ring Day, held several weeks before graduation. The pastor blessed class rings, saying, "...In the years to come when this school, its faculty and its principles have become vague memories, your ring should help you to recall all that your school symbolized..."

Graduation ceremonies took place on Sunday afternoons in the Chapel of St. Theresa-The Little Flower next door. These were very traditional, white cap and gown, religious ceremonies. Following a formal Mass, the ceremony culminated with the officiating priest launching the graduates into adult life with an



inspiring commencement address.

As a result of increasing demographic changes, shifting populations and financial constraints affecting so many Catholic schools at the time, Girls' Catholic Central High School held its final graduation in June 1969 and closed.

In 1973, the school building became St. Patrick's Senior Center, providing a comprehensive health and wellness program, hot and nutritious meals and transportation assistance to older adults in the area.

Hundreds of Girls Catholic Central alumnae hold frequent reunions, often coming from across the country for fun, friendship and to reflect upon "the unique GCC experience." The Class of 1962 will [celebrate its 50th reunion](#) June 8-10. The weekend event will feature a special alumni program in the school auditorium, a tour of the school building, Sunday morning Mass at the Chapel of the Little Flower and lunch at a nearby restaurant.

In 1962

Pope John XXIII opened the Second Vatican Council. It was also the year he excommunicated Cuba's Fidel Castro.

Puerto Rico became a commonwealth of the United States.

The first transatlantic television transmission occurred via the Telstar Satellite, making worldwide television and cable networks a reality.

Lt. Col. John H. Glenn Jr. became the first American to orbit Earth three times, in just under five hours.

Dayton Hudson Corporation opened the first of its Target discount stores in Roseville, Minn.

Johnny Carson began hosting *The Tonight Show*. The Beatles' first record, "My Bonnie," was released by Polydor. *Silent Spring* (Rachel Carson), *In the Clearing* (Robert Frost), *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (Ken Kesey) and *The Colossus and Other Poems* (Sylvia Plath) were published.

West Side Story received a Best Picture Oscar. John Steinbeck received the Nobel Prize for Literature. The New York Yankees won the World Series, beating the San Francisco Giants in seven games. It took the Boston Celtics seven games with the Los Angeles Lakers to win the NBA Championship. The Stanley Cup went to the Toronto Maple Leafs, after they defeated the Chicago Black Hawks in six games.

William Faulkner, E. E. Cummings, Eleanor Roosevelt and Marilyn Monroe died. Rosie O'Donnell, Jim Carrey, Paula Abdul and Jon Stewart were born.