

Chicago Tribune

FAITH, HOPE AND SCHOLARSHIP

William Mullen, Tribune Staff Writer CHICAGO TRIBUNE March 12, 1995

Damen was a master at raising money. He was comfortable with bankers, leveraging loans out of already mortgaged church property. He was adroit at talking parish housewives out of "a helping from the sugar bowl," getting them to dip into scarce household ready cash for parish work.

A powerful orator with a national reputation, Damen was a natural showman. On several occasions he ostentatiously auctioned off his own horse and buggy, emphasizing his personal sacrifice to find funds for church work. Evidently, however, he did so with well-placed confidence in each instance that whoever the buyer was, he would honorably allow the priest to keep both the money and his conveyance.

As Damen's church went soaring up at what is now Roosevelt Road and Blue Island Avenue, the area around it quickly filled in with cottages and shanties. Within 15 years it was the most populous Roman Catholic parish in the world, mostly made up of recently arrived Irish immigrant workers.

Father "Diamond," as his name was pronounced in the brogue of his mostly illiterate parishioners, had 3,000 children in his parish grammar schools by 1868. He wanted to boost the brightest of them into the upper echelons of the city's society with higher education. He already had plans to erect a Jesuit

college (the equivalent today of both a high school and college) next door to his church.

Damen believed the college would benefit the whole city, so he decided not to press his financially pinched parishioners for funds to build it. Instead, he took his oratorical skills on the national lecture circuit, raising money for the school all over the country.

Always in a hurry, when he had enough money in 1867 to lay the school's foundation, he wanted to get started. His superior, the Jesuit provincial, feared the timing wasn't right and blocked him. Damen simply waited for the provincial to leave on a long trip to Rome, then hired the workers. By the time the provincial returned, the school's walls already were rising.

Finished in 1870, the resulting six-story schoolhouse was a striking beauty, done in a style known as French Second Empire. Within the first couple of years of the school's opening, Damen's prescience was proven again. It was one of the earliest schools in the city to offer higher education, and it immediately attracted students from all over the city, not just from Damen's Irish parish.

A Grabowski was one of the early students, but a lot of German, French and Italian surnames began showing up, too, and Protestants among the Catholics. One of the first potential students to be turned away, however, was a female. It would take 110 years before females were allowed in, in 1979.

On Oct. 8, 1871, while he was delivering a lecture in New York City, Damen received an urgent telegram from one of his parish assistants in Chicago. The city was in flames, and it appeared that his church, his schools and his parish were about to be destroyed.

Damen spent the night in prayer, promising that he would keep seven candles lighted in perpetuity in Holy Family Church if his buildings and his flock were

spared. Whether due to a miracle or to shifting winds, when Damen arrived home a couple of days later, most of the city was in ashes, but nothing in his parish had been touched. To this day seven candles continuously light a shrine in the church, though nowadays the candles are electric rather than wax.

The neighborhood never "arrived" after Damen's time. Its modest homes instead housed a succession of immigrant groups following the Irish: Italians, Jews, Greeks and southern African-Americans. Since the 1950s ABLA Homes, a typically vast and grim public housing complex, has loomed across the street from St. Ignatius.

Ideas about education, a field notorious for following fad and fashion, has undergone constant change over the last 125 years in most places. St. Ignatius naturally has changed, too, to keep up with technological and intellectual advances. Nonetheless, the school has stubbornly clung to many elements of the classical Jesuit education that were at the school in 1870.

The most obvious change is the disappearance of the priests who once taught there. Like most religious orders', the Jesuits' ranks have been decimated by a falloff in numbers of Catholics taking religious vows.

With fewer Jesuit teachers available, the school hired lay teachers. They, of course, demand salaries and benefits that the priests did not, so the salaries of the 72 lay teachers now there accounts for most of the tuition expenditure. Only seven Jesuit priests remain at the school, and the atmosphere of the place has changed forever.

Frank Raispis, a lay teacher at St. Ignatius since 1955, is the senior and perhaps most beloved faculty member on the staff. He was himself a St. Ignatius student in the 1940s, when more than 40 Jesuit teacher-priests taught there, living in the east end of the building.

"There were a lot of outstanding teachers then," Raispis says, "but with all those priests and all boys for students, it was a very different atmosphere. It was stricter. When a priest walked into a room, you stood up, and it was 'Yes, sir,' this, and 'No, Father,' that. You didn't question authority, you simply did as you were told.

"I worked my butt off, but I was too scared to ask questions. Now, it's healthier, it's more advantageous to be open to questioning and exploring problems together."

Jesuit education has always kept up with the latest advances in science, stressing science as the means of understanding creation. As a result, St. Ignatius' science and math curriculums probably have changed more than those of most schools through the years.

Some of the changes have been those necessary at every school, such as the arrival of the computer age, though at St. Ignatius it is a priest who teaches computer class. One of the changes may end up affecting how science is taught in high schools elsewhere. Jack Thole, one of the school's science teachers, is co-developer and co-author of a national project to integrate the teaching of high school biology, chemistry and physics as a single, two-year course.

"In school, biology, chemistry and physics might naturally seem like three different areas of knowledge, but in life they all merge, so this is a way for kids to see how the sciences interrelate with one another," Thole says. "If you're describing the human eye in biology, you're using chemistry and physics, too.

"With our integrated course, we reverse the order of how the components are usually introduced to students. We teach the physics first, because it lays the foundation for all science, then the chemistry, because it lays the foundation for the biology, then the biology.

"So far we're the only high school in the country that has made integrated science mandatory. It means every kid in this school has to take college preparatory physics. I doubt that any other high school in the country can say that."

It also may be the only coeducational high school in the country in which female students as a group consistently perform better in math and science than their male counterparts. Educators for decades have struggled to understand the phenomenon that females thrive at math and science when it is taught in classes with no male students present, but do poorly in the same subjects when they are taught coed.

The phenomenon is present at even the best coed institutions in the country, such as the Illinois Math and Science Academy in Aurora, a school that accepts only children who can score in the top 2 percent of national standardized achievement tests. The girls' performance in science and math at the school was so consistently low when in coed classes that the Academy is now going to single-sex classes.

Since St. Ignatius went co-ed in 1979, it has split the number of entering freshmen students on an exact 50-50, boy-girl ratio. And, ever since, the girls have dominated the school academically.

"Damned if I know why," says Thole, whose daughter went to St. Ignatius. "The girls at this school take a back seat to nobody. They're more aggressive than the boys. In my advanced chemistry course, they outnumber the boys 2 to 1."

Thole and others at the school, however, believe the female dominance has more to do with competition to get into the school than with how they are taught.

Far fewer Catholic college-prep schools admit girls than admit boys. For every two boys who apply to St. Ignatius, three girls apply. With the strict 50-50 ratio in place, the girls selected for admission average out better academically than the boys. The average score on national standardized tests for this year's freshman girls was in the 88th percentile, compared with 86 for the boys.

In actuality, most freshmen entering St. Ignatius rank much higher in the percentile ranges of the testing, somewhere in the 90s. The school makes some exceptions down to the 65th percentile for students they call "legacies," children or siblings of St. Ignatius alumni. Even then, everybody has to perform to the school's exacting academic and behavioral standards once they're in, or they face automatic expulsion.

With tuition so high, students and especially parents end up highly motivated, keeping the students in line and up to speed, so as not to waste the opportunity--or the money.

"Education can't be considered a 'bought' service," Rowe says. "It's a group of people working together for these children, and we tell the parents that they've got to be available for us and their kids. Parental involvement is crucial, along with parental support of the teachers."

Few kids flunk out, though one who did a few years ago became a National Merit Scholarship finalist the same year. Gang bangers, druggies and anti-social misfits aren't attracted to the school in the first place. If such individuals did get into St. Ignatius, they'd have to toe the line or they would soon be shown the door.

"Public high schools are faced with disciplinary problems involving guns, knives, drugs, assault and battery and what have you," says Jay Lalley, St. Ignatius' principal and a father of students there.

"Most of our discipline revolves around things like going down the 'up' staircase, tardiness or wearing a collarless shirt. But we're strict about maintaining our standards and, if a kid repeatedly breaks the rules, we ask him to leave.

"I think that is one of the reasons why we attract such good teachers. We pay our teachers pretty well (\$42,000 average compared with \$43,000 for Chicago public schools; per-pupil expenditures are \$6,196 at St. Ignatius and average \$5,867 in Chicago public schools), though not as well as many affluent suburban systems. But our teachers don't spend their day baby-sitting or being a policeman. They just teach, and the children they teach are very bright and motivated."

And what they teach is often not so much different from the lessons parceled out by the school's priests in 1870.

"The brand name is Jesuit Catholic education," says Rev. Joe Brennan, a Jesuit counselor at the school. "We lay the curriculum in front of the kids and their parents and tell them: 'It's Jesuit, it's college prep and it's tough. If you want it, come and get it.' We get good kids who buy into hard work, like three to four hours of homework a night, guaranteed."

Greek and Latin, the classical languages, always have been strongly endorsed by the Jesuits and are big at St. Ignatius. There are four full-time Latin and classical Greek teachers, and they are among the most popular and admired at the school. Rowe believes he might have the largest classics department of any high school in the country.

Normally about a third of each entering class signs up for a minimum of three years of Latin and Greek rather than other foreign languages the school offers. It's a course selection even some parents dispute, believing one of the "living" languages--French, German or Spanish--would be more practical.

"Who the hell says 'practical' is the aim of a Jesuit program?" says Raispis, one of the four classics instructors and the winner of virtually every teacher award around, including the prestigious Golden Apple. Raispis pushes the classics for the humanistic values and insights that are revealed in reading ancient thinkers in their own language. But studying Latin and Greek also works purely as an exercise in mental discipline, he says.

"I tell my kids that to be a truly outstanding scholar, you have to have a tough mind and an iron butt; you just have to make yourself sit there and do it, day in and day out," he says.

"The neat thing about our kids is that they absolutely buy into that idea. I have 32 sophomores this year who signed up for an elective course in classical Greek that takes up their one free period a day."

In the name of diversity, St. Ignatius actively looks for non-Catholic students, who now make up about 15 percent of the student body: Protestants, Jews, Muslims and Buddhists. Their presence, however, does not water down the strong religious impulse, present since 1870 and still flavoring every class and activity in the school.

Three years of religion is mandatory in the curriculum, taught by a staff of seven, though these days every religion teacher, except for one nun, is a lay person. It starts with a survey of all the world's religions in freshman year, a course often cited by students and graduates as one of the most engaging and memorable classes they've ever taken.