



Chicagoland

Local historian compiling history of St. Ignatius Prep

By Michelle Martin | Staff Writer

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Ellen Skerrett in front of a historical photo of St. Ignatius College Prep's neighborhood. (Photo courtesy of St. Ignatius/Ryan Bergin)

Ellen Skerrett has taken over a table in the corner of the Brunswick Room on the top floor of St. Ignatius College Prep, pouring over the archives of the school and the Jesuit community in Chicago as she works on a book to be published in honor of the school's 150th anniversary.

The two-story room — it has a double staircase leading to a gallery around the edges — once served as part of the school's natural history museum. The wood panels still bear carvings of native plants from Illinois, but most of the glass-fronted cases hold books, and students can sit at round banquet-style tables to study.

“I think it's good for the students to see me here,” said Skerrett, who was honored for her work as “the pre-eminent historian of Chicago and a renowned scholar of Irish America” by the American Catholic Historical Association in early January. “This is what a historian does.”

“This” means digging up records and reading them, line by line, often working to decipher words penned by hand more than 100 years ago, around the time of the founding of what was called St. Ignatius College in 1869.

It was by reading the diary of the Jesuit community at St. Ignatius — a daily record compiled by an anonymous Jesuit — that Skerrett learned that Father Augustus Tolton stayed overnight at the house and appealed for funds in the 1880s.

It was in the same records that she found a letter from Jesuit Father Arnold Damen (yes, the Damen Avenue Damen), who founded first Holy Family Parish and then St. Ignatius, from which would spring Loyola University Chicago and the Stritch School of Medicine and the

many other Jesuit institutions that have grown up in and alongside the Archdiocese of Chicago.

The letter is requesting permission for an artist to copy paintings from a Jesuit church in Brussels.

“I’d love to know if those paintings were ever made, and if so, where they ended up,” Skerrett said.

During her time at St. Ignatius, Skerrett has spoken to classes about her work and what she’s found. She also created a brochure that was distributed to guests who visited the school when it participated in Open House Chicago for the first time in October.

She said the project, which she expects to finish in the fall, has given her a greater appreciation of the role St. Ignatius has played in the life of the city.

“I began to see how engaged the school has been with the larger city,” Skerrett said, all the way back to 1871 when it served as the bishop’s residence and housed orphans and other displaced people after the Great Chicago Fire.

Scarcely 20 years after the school was founded, the neighborhood had changed from mostly Irish to Jewish and Italian, but that didn’t stop it from building what is still called the “new building” in 1895 to better accommodate the 500 scholars in attendance.

Leaders discussed moving in 1953 after a fire damaged the building, and again in the 1960s, as Chicago experienced civil unrest.

“The school stayed when it could have moved to the suburbs,” said Skerrett, a South Sider who has also lived her whole life in Chicago. “I’m amazed at the act of staying put. It’s an act of faith.”

John Chandler, a St. Ignatius faculty member since 1974, is now the school’s vice president and is set to become the school’s first lay president in July. He said the school has offered a consistent voice speaking for both academic excellence and openness to all since its founding.

St. Ignatius has welcomed immigrants from other countries and from the American South during the Great Migration, and it has been a voice of stability as the neighborhood around the school changed and changed again, Chandler said.

“In a way, you could say we were Chicago’s first magnet school,” he said. “St. Ignatius has been a leader, a civic leader and a stabilizing force.”

Chandler said that when St. Ignatius began looking for someone to tell its story, Skerrett was clearly the right person.

“There is no other Catholic historian that has that understanding of the Catholic faith and the complexities of the Catholic Church in the United States to tell this story,” Chandler said. “She has the distinct ability to bring the past to life, to take the skeletons and put flesh and blood on them. I can’t think of a more thorough or dogged researcher.”

Skerrett, whose first book was “Chicago: City of Neighborhoods” (Loyola Press, 1986), said she always looks for the hidden history, the minutiae of everyday life like the nuggets that can be found in the

Jesuits' daily records. That's partly what sparked her interest in Catholic history, Jane Addams' Hull House is the subject of much historical study despite the fact that Holy Family Parish had been working with immigrant families a scant mile away for more than 30 years when it was founded in 1889, and St. Ignatius had been providing a college-level education to those families' sons for 20 years.

“The idea of providing a classical Jesuit education in a city of immigrants,” she said. “Talk about thinking big. It was this huge leap of faith when you can clearly see the anti-Catholicism in the city. All you have to do is pick up a Tribune from that time and see the horrible things they said about Catholics, especially the Irish.”

Perhaps to try to counteract that, St. Ignatius held exhibitions that were open to the public rather than more traditional graduation exercises, allowing students to showcase musical, theatrical and oratorical achievements, Skerrett said.

It continued to provide both high school and college-level academics until 1922, when Loyola University completed its move north to Rogers Park, leaving the original campus to the high school. Skerrett also wrote the book — literally — about Loyola University, “Born in Chicago: A History of Chicago's Jesuit University” (Loyola Press, 2008).

At St. Ignatius, which only educated boys until 1979, her focus on “hidden history” led her to look for the women. They were always influential in the school, both the mothers who volunteered their time and labor and the nuns who taught elementary school and acted as de facto talent scouts.

“I think of those eighth-grade nuns who saw the ability in a student, and would go to the parents and say, ‘You need to send your son to the Jesuits,’” she said. “The women’s influence is always there.”

A sesquicentennial exhibit she helped put together on the school’s ground floor includes historical photos, starting with Father Damen and ending with this year’s freshmen, the class of 2023. It also includes photos of the first girls to graduate from the school. One of them, Maura Maloney, is now assistant principal for academics.

Jesuit Father Michael Caruso, who has served as St. Ignatius’ president for the last 10 years, said he is proud of the school’s exceptional legacy.

“When I came, it impressed me as a small college,” he said. “People tell me, ‘I’ve never seen another high school like that,’ and I say, ‘Neither have I.’”

Now that the area around the school, just south of the West Loop, between the University of Illinois at Chicago and the Illinois Medical District, is booming, Caruso said he’s been invited to countless dedications for new facilities in the neighborhood over the past decade.

“This is the one thing that’s been here through it all,” he said.