

# The Florida Catholic

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Pensacola-Tallahassee Edition

## Schools hit by Katrina wind down difficult year with hope

By **Peggy DeKeyser**, Waveland



COURTESY PHOTO

**Caroline Bush, volunteer coordinator for Catholic Charities of Northwest Florida, loads donated prom dresses for the trip to the Long-Term Recovery Center in Gulfport, Miss. James Denny Jr., grandfather of Eileen Valle of Catholic Charities' Pensacola regional office, donated the use of his truck for the trip.**

Every time the wind off the Mississippi Sound starts to howl a bit, the children of St. Clare Catholic School get a little edgy. They have been attending classes in Quonset huts for five months now, ever since school reopened after Hurricane Katrina's storm surge leveled their former school buildings along with the parish church, parish hall, rectory and many of the students' homes.

It's a difficult situation, even though the tent-like structures are relatively comfortable. And if the winds get too strong, they have to evacuate the children — children who are all too familiar with the effects of nature's fury at their young ages, according to Father Cuddy O'Connell, pastor of the parish.

In nearby Bay St. Louis, the building at Our Lady Academy may have been destroyed by the storm, but school goes on.

Sister Jackie Howard, RSM, principal, says that fact alone is remarkable.

"When CNN came to interview us, they sort of lost interest when they found out we were 'just having school.' But that's the point. We're just having school. Considering what the students have been through, that's remarkable," Sister Howard said.

The school is sharing facilities with St. Stanislaus College, its neighbor on the coast.

"We didn't expect the number of students to return who did. In November, we planned to have about 250 students and we're approaching 600 between the two schools now," said Sister Elisa Bauman, RSM.

Students are getting on with their lives, having pretty well adjusted to post-storm living.

"We have a mixture — kids who have their homes and kids who don't, kids who are living in cramped trailers and those who are living with other families. Getting back with their friends, that's pretty much their lives and they tolerate the rest. One of our teachers has four children; six people in a trailer. He brings his children up on the weekend just to run the halls to get some exercise," Sister Bauman said.

When it comes to homework, it's a different story. Students who previously had easy access to books and computers at home now do without. They were washed away with the rest. Teachers have adapted their assignments to meet the new reality.

"I try not to give as much homework. They're living in very close quarters with brothers and sisters. They're helping to rebuild their houses. They have a lot more responsibilities. We're covering the same material and testing on the same level; we're just not collecting as much daily work," said Susan Duggins, high school math teacher.

"I'm not able to give the projects I used to give. They can't get even simple materials and they don't have Internet access. It's changed my teaching style. We can't tell them something as simple as 'Bring in an envelope.' Getting an envelope means driving to Gulfport. There still aren't any stores open nearby," said Christy Elias, science teacher.

"The students generally don't want to talk about the storm anymore. They take every opportunity they can find for fun. For every day, it works pretty well for them, but when something special comes along — a holiday, prom, looking forward to graduation, any of the special events that they've built their expectations around — you can tell they're feeling the loss again," she said.

The prom is a prime example. In the past, Our Lady Academy proms were held at the yacht club, a venue that no longer exists. The only other remaining facility that is suitable, a banquet hall in Diamondhead north of I-10, has been booked solid since October. So OLA will hold its prom in the school gym this year.

"It doesn't seem like a huge adjustment to those of us who remember when proms were always in the school gym, but for these kids, it's an example of one more thing that the storm took away," Sister Bauman said.

Sacred Heart Health System and Catholic Charities of Northwest Florida helped some young women on the Mississippi Gulf Coast overcome the loss of prom dresses in the storm. Each year, Sacred Heart holds a sale/giveaway in Pensacola of donated dresses and accessories, so girls who could not otherwise afford to can have the experience of prom. When the event ended, Sacred Heart officials contacted Catholic Charities to see if

the agency had a use for the more than 200 leftover dresses.

"We picked them up, loaded them into the truck and headed straight for the Long-Term Recovery (LTR) Center in Gulfport with them," said Caroline Bush, volunteer coordinator for the agency. LTR assigned a volunteer to oversee distribution of the dresses.

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