

Mount Carmel president retires but will never really leave

By Lisa Harlow

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ESSEX - For more than three decades, Kathleen Sipes, president of Our Lady of Mount Carmel School, went to work with a smile on her face.

The reason? It all comes down to the students.

"The kids have always been the most important thing to me," Sipes said. "You work at a school because you love the kids. It becomes a part of your life. This is my heart's work."

And when Sipes officially retires June 30, it will be the kids that she will miss most.

"Our school is like a family. Our students are loved and cared for. It's a really unique community," she said. "There's a pride and a connectedness here that you don't see a lot of places."

After having taught at St. Michael the Archangel School in Overlea for nearly ten years, Sipes arrived on the Our Lady of Mount Carmel campus in Essex in 1983 as its elementary school principal. She became high school principal, then president of Mount Carmel's merged school program. Through it all, Sipes has seen many changes.

"I've always asked, 'What can we do to meet the needs of the students?' That's still what we try to do today," she said.

According to Sipes, Mount Carmel, one of three schools in the Archdiocese of Baltimore offering pre-K through 12th grade, tries to stay ahead of the curve.

She is proud of the programs she helped develop, including being a pioneer in extended care; a preschool; high school honors that offers parallel enrollment with the Community College of Baltimore County; a partnership with Catholic Relief Services that stresses global service; and the Star curriculum for students with special needs.

Even as an administrator, Sipes continued to teach, this year a morality and social justice class for high school juniors.

"The interaction with students keeps it all worthwhile and energizes you," she said.

"Our students are so enthusiastic and joyful."

Sipes' position will be filled by an acting president, Monsignor Robert L. Hartnett, pastor, for the 2015-16 school year.

"It's a good time to retire," said Sipes, who lives in Joppatowne. "I have two really great principals (Chris Ashby in the upper school, and Christine Olszewski in the

lower school), and a great Early Learning Center director (Michele Reynolds). The leadership is really strong.”

What will retirement bring?

“I would like to not be so occupied, not have quite so many demands. I want to have time to go to games, read, clean my house,” she said. “But after being such a part of this community for so long, I can’t imagine staying away. And if you’re in education, you don’t really retire; you just take a different slant at it.”

Sipes is excited to see what the future brings for Mount Carmel. She will watch that unfold from a different perspective, as three of her six grandchildren attend the school. Her daughter, Susan, also attended Mount Carmel.

Sipes would like to see the school continue to provide an affordable education and keep up to date with technology and teacher training.

“The world moves so fast. You have to keep pace,” she said.

Even though Sipes won’t be a daily fixture on campus, she’ll still be a regular at 10 a.m. Mass each Sunday, and you’ll definitely see her at the school’s Grandparents’ Day.

“I have learned, that once you are part of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, you are for always,” she said.

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