

Sister Catherine Phelps, longtime leader of Trinity School, dies

Sister of Notre Dame de Namur Catherine Phelps died unexpectedly June 15. A Baltimore native, she served as head of Trinity School in Ellicott City for 47 years, twice leading it National Blue Ribbon recognition.

Her exact age was unavailable.

“She had a Christ-like love for every child,” said Father Christopher Whatley, the pastor of St. Mark in Catonsville, who ministered at Trinity School during his early years as a priest.

Father Whatley said that if someone spent an hour or a day with Sister Catherine, the one takeaway was her devotion to the children in her school.

According to a 2011 profile in the Catholic Review, her legacy at Trinity School, was marked by the building of a new middle school; renovations of old buildings; the launch of the Julie Program, which works with K-fourth-grade students who have language-based learning issues; and the development of a new media center.

While directing a school that was recognized in both 1989 and 1999 by the U.S. Department of Education as a National Blue Ribbon School of Excellence, Sister Catherine’s presence extended to playground, lunch and carpool duties.

“She didn’t want to spend time in her office,” said Sister of Notre Dame de Namur Shawn Marie Maguire, who knew Sister Catherine for more than 40 years. “She just absolutely loved children. She was just a wonderful, wonderful person.”

Sister Shawn Marie attended a four-hour meeting with Sister Catherine just three days before her passing. They taught together at Trinity School in the early 1970s, and since 2012 Sister Catherine had served on the Board of Trustees at Maryvale Preparatory School in Lutherville, which Sister Shawn led from 1981 to 2012.

Both Trinity School and Maryvale are sponsored by their order. In May, Sister Catherine was honored as Maryvale's 2018 Alumna of the Year.

Born in Baltimore and raised in the suburbs of Washington, D.C., Sister Catherine was among the first girls to attend Maryvale Preparatory School in Lutherville when it opened in 1945.

During her time as a pupil of the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur, she felt called to the religious life. Upon graduation from Maryvale in 1949, she entered the order, and in 1952 professed her final vows.

Her first assignment took her to St. Martin School in Washington, D.C., where she taught for nine years as she earned a bachelor's in education from what is now Trinity Washington University.

Sister Catherine returned to Maryvale to teach eighth grade, and then serve as the lower school principal. She then served as principal of St. Ursula School in Parkville before becoming principal of Trinity School in 1971.

"I love children," Sister Catherine said in a 2005 interview with the Catholic Review that celebrated her 35th anniversary as head of Trinity School. "I'm driven because schools like this are as necessary today as they were 35 years ago. They're needed not just for the strong academic program, but to impart values, nurture faith and impart a moral code."

In the 2005 interview, she said that she always wanted to be a teacher and planned

to remain at Trinity “as long as I have creative ideas and a lot of energy.”

According to a post on Trinity School’s Facebook page made by Gregory E. Jones, chair of the school’s Board of Trustees, Sister Catherine had recently not been feeling well. She was admitted June 15 to Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore, where her condition rapidly worsened.

A viewing will be held at St. Mark Church in Catonsville June 20, 6-8 p.m., and June 21, 9-10:30 a.m., to be followed by an 11 a.m. funeral Mass.

Email Emily Rosenthal at erosenthal@CatholicReview.org