

St. Francis teacher remains young at heart

The motto at St. Francis of Assisi School in northeast Baltimore attests that “it’s not just school – but a way of life.”

Renee Buettner, a first-grade teacher, takes that to heart.

“This is really where her life is,” said Monsignor William F. Burke, the St. Francis pastor, of a woman he spoke of as “welcoming to everybody.”

Mrs. Buettner’s involvement at the school and parish accelerated with the founding of a small preschool almost 20 years ago.

Mrs. Buettner, who spent 12 years teaching in Baltimore City public schools, opened the Mayfield Christian Preschool in 1989, making use of space at another neighborhood church that gave the preschool its name. This year the school has moved to the first floor of St. Francis and assumed the name of the parish.

The venture’s first students included Colleen Buettner, now 23, the youngest daughter of Mrs. Buettner and her husband, Jerry.

“I was thinking that I would do it only one year and then return to the city school system,” Mrs. Buettner said. “Needless to say, I fell in love with the children and their parents and stayed there for 12 years.”

Mrs. Buettner began the venture with a dozen 4-year-olds. When Mrs. Buettner left more than a decade after its founding, it had grown to nearly 60, ages 2 to 4, Mrs. Buettner said.

When the St. Francis first-grade teacher left to birth and raise twins, Mrs. Buettner eyed that position, mindful that “I was washing the eighteenth pair of hands for the third time each day.” Equipped with a master’s degree in reading and learning disabilities, she had always wanted to teach the first grade and saw the opening as “a sign from God that it was time to move on.”

Encouraged by Monsignor Burke to apply for the position, Mrs. Buettner has since become even more of a mainstay in her home parish, where she has also coached several sports.

“I have never looked back and thoroughly love being with those love-filled first-graders,” she said. They are so eager to learn and work very hard. I truly love coming to school each day. Most days, I learn more from my students.”

An important part of her classroom instruction is the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd. The program, according to www.cgsusa.org, “is an approach to the religious formation of children ... rooted in the Bible, the liturgy of the church and the educational principles of Maria Montessori.”

Among the materials are items dealing with the sacraments and a child-sized altar with a chalice.

“I work with children, with child-size materials,” Mrs. Buettner said. “The program focuses on Bible stories, which have handcrafted materials. They work with the materials in a quiet and prayerful way. I wish every child would have the experience with this program.”

In her fourth decade of teaching, Mrs. Buettner, 60, shows no signs of slowing down.

Earlier this decade, she completed the Baltimore Marathon purely by accident, as she and a daughter intended to run a portion of the race, got caught up in

conversation and completed the 26.2 miles. In 2004, she finished second among women 55-59 in the event's half marathon.

Mrs. Buettner shares that passion with her students, crossing Harford Road to circle Lake Montebello.

"We have a running club," she said. "By the end of the year, they're running 1.3 miles around the lake."