

# St. Joseph ‘cheerleader’ wears many wacky hats

The shiny gold headband with two “Happy New Year” gold stars bouncing on springs wasn’t yet secure on Debbie Swiss’ “magical snow hat.”

That’s because the 58-year-old physical education and art teacher at St. Joseph, Cockeysville, was still figuring out the best way to attach white “sparklers” and blue snowflakes to the hat before welcoming St. Joseph students to 2008.

“I do it for the kids. We have to have fun,” said Mrs. Swiss, who wears a crazy headpiece or costume most mornings in the school car-pool line, where she serves as a parking lot monitor. “I want the kids to say, ‘We’re at school, we’re going to have fun.’” (Although one eighth-grader commented, “Oh, Mrs. Swiss, I’m so glad you’re not my mother!”)

Valentine’s red in February, Irish green in March, April spring flowers ... the themes roll on through December. Toting large bags of crazy hats down the wooden steps inside her Roland Park home, the native Baltimorean pulled out a plethora of designs with which she entertains kids and parents, who never know what crazy garb to expect from the spirited teacher.

“We know almost every morning when we see Mrs. Swiss,” said Teresa Nickel, a school parent, “that she will have on a crazy hat accompanied by a genuine warm welcome to the start of a new day. The anticipation of her next creation and her friendly morning hello puts a smile on our faces.”

From Halloween hats and wigs to elf hats with ears; from straw hats to Ravens hats; from a brown beaver turkey hat with feathers to a green St. Lucia wreath – Mrs. Swiss owns hoards of holiday-themed headgear both purchased and homemade.

“Just give me a theme,” said the parishioner of the Cathedral of Mary Our Queen, Homeland, who in her spare time referees lacrosse and field hockey, mothers three adult children and sews.

With 25 dress hats she had kept from her late mother's collection, she sometimes embellishes with a glue gun and props to transform them into seasonal creations.

"Mother's always with me," said the St. Joseph's 16-year veteran. "I'm very much like her. She'd always turn something small into fun."

Through rain, wind, cold and heat for nine years, Mrs. Swiss and Kathy Schaub, assistant principal, have monitored the "quarry side" parking lot 30 minutes every morning to greet students and see them safely out of the way of vehicles.

"I feel like we are walking cheerleaders," said Mrs. Swiss, a Colts cheerleader from 1970 through 1976. "We are the megaphones, the in-person 'IM'ers' in the car-pool line."

Mrs. Schaub joins the dress-up fun for the first and last days of school, Mardi Gras, Preakness, Halloween and St. Patrick's Day.

"All the other occasions she does on her own," laughed Mrs. Schaub. "You need one person like her and one person like me to appreciate her."

Known to have 'out-hatted' her parking lot partner, the assistant principal said she "enjoys working with Debbie. She's always upbeat, always positive, and with the challenge of being out there with that many children and drivers, you really appreciate having that second person. We're a team."

The "parking lot angels" receive positive feedback from students and parents. "They like to have someone greet them at the car," said Mrs. Schaub, "to say good morning and smile at them - whether we dress up or we don't."

Now chairing the Catholic Schools Week committee at St. Joseph's, Mrs. Swiss is in charge of planning special events for the students, which certainly will include "Hat Day."

"Catholic Schools Week should be so much fun," she said, herself an alumna of Towson Catholic High School.

With this colorful and spirited teacher wearing the committee chair hat, no doubt it

will be.