

## 175 years in Corktown

Thu, Oct 31

detroitnews.com



[Purchase Image](#)

**Eighth grade math teacher Diana Lindsey stands over student Kyann Byers at The Most Holy Trinity School in Detroit's Corktown on Friday. The school is celebrating its 175 birthday. (David Coates / The Detroit News)**

Detroit— Ray Moncivais once walked the halls of Most Holy Trinity School as a student. More than 40 years later, he is responsible for keeping those same hallways clean and safe.

“Nuns were the teachers. It was a lot stricter then,” said Moncivais, who is the school’s janitor and attended

classes there from 1964 to 1970. “I’m sure we did a lot of joking around, but I like to think of us as straight and narrow kids.”

As a lifelong resident of the historic Corktown neighborhood and father of three children who attended Most Holy Trinity, he says he’s seen how the neighborhood has changed and how the school has remained a constant through turbulent times.

“I’ve seen the ups and downs,” he said. “Thankfully, we have a lot of benefactors who don’t want to see this school fail.”

Administrators at the school say Most Holy Trinity is the best kept secret in the city — a secret that this year celebrated its 175th year in the business of educating children.

“People don’t even know we’re here. People who live down here don’t even know we’re here,” said Principal Sheila Dunleavy. “I think it’s because we’ve kept it in mission mode and kept it humble.”

But as most Catholic schools in the city of Detroit have shut down and more students make the switch to public or charter schools, Most Holy Trinity is ready to make a bigger pitch for students from all walks of life.

The school has 131 students in preschool through eighth grade, with 61 percent of them Catholic. About 35 percent of the students speak Spanish as a first language and 65 percent are at or below the poverty level, attending on full or partial scholarship.

“Unless we let people know we’re here, there aren’t a lot of kids in the neighborhood,” said Dunleavy. “We can’t be a neighborhood school anymore.”

Tuition costs \$3,100 for members of the archdiocese and \$4,100 for outside students. Enrollment has been steady for the last decade, said Dunleavy.

“What really gets me are the children that came here who are now adults and have kids of their own that they want to send here,” said Imelda Pena, who attended the school in the 1970s and came back in 1998 to work as an administrative assistant. “Watching how they’ve grown, I feel it in my heart the love I have for them.”

That sense of community makes the school feel welcoming, said eighth-grader Madison Leake, 13.

“It’s good that it’s a small school. It feels homey and natural,” said the Southfield resident, who wants to be an entrepreneur and social worker when she grows up. “Everybody knows everybody, so you feel safe.”

Community has always been a part of the history of the Most Holy Trinity Parish, the school and the nearby Cabrini Clinic, which provides free health services to thousands of Detroiters every year.

“Trinity has always defined church as beyond ceremony and ritual,” said Monsignor Russ Kohler, the parish’s pastor. “It was about education and hospitals and unions and factory workers and the neighborhood.”

The Corktown neighborhood, bounded by Rosa Parks Boulevard, Michigan Avenue, Porter Street and the John Lodge Expressway, has seen massive changes since it was founded by Irish immigrants in the mid-1800s. Most Holy Trinity Parish was established in 1834 to serve those early residents.

“The early Irish demanded a school. They said that defined an American, that we had access to education,” said Kohler. “Father Martin Kundig (who started the parish) said, ‘Reason has to accompany faith.’ ”

The Irish gave way to the Germans, who were in turn replaced by a large Maltese population. Later, the neighborhood transitioned to a largely Mexican population and became home to many Southern laborers who came to work in the auto industry.

At one time, the nearby Michigan Central Station stood in grandeur, welcoming thousands of these new arrivals to the city by train. Now it looms empty and decayed. Tiger Stadium, a neighbor for nearly a century, is gone.

“Education is not an easy thing to fund these days, whether it’s church education or civil education,” said Auxiliary Bishop Donald Hanchon, who oversees Detroit’s 59 churches and parishes for the archdiocese. “In Most Holy Trinity’s case there was always that leadership to say, ‘No, we have to continue.’ ”

This year, the school hired Eric Walton, a former fifth-grade teacher at Old Redford Academy, to teach preschoolers alongside Lucy Gonzalez, who has been with the school for seven years.

“The religious aspect, to be able to use Christ as our focus, it helps with behavior,” said Walton, whose 3-year-old son, Rylan, is in the class. “The history here, that makes a difference too. To be part of it means a lot.”

Recently, on a typical day in the preschool class, the students were working on identifying the letter “E.” A board tells students that the Saint of the Week is St. Elisabeth, the theme is elephants and the color is black. Walton and Gonzalez split their time between the 12 students, some of whom speak only Spanish.

“We have the numbers, letters, everything in Spanish,” said Gonzalez. “All the kids are getting the language.”

The students each have a different book to read and look at pictures, some about shapes and colors, others the classics like “Clifford the Big Red Dog.” Some call the teachers over to show them what they can do, excited and proud to share what they are learning.

“I love my job,” said Walton. “These kids make me laugh every day.”



- Most Holy Trinity is the best kept secret in the city — a secret that this year celebrated its 175th year in the business of educating children and remained in a changing neighborhood and turbulent times.

*From left are pre-school students Maurecio Davis; Eleanorah Askew; Saniyah Austin and Aniyah McMurian at The Most Holy Trinity School in on Friday.*