

# St. Dominic School marks 65 years

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CHECKLIST COMPLETED School parents Mary and Joseph de Wit gave a talk at the 65th-anniversary dinner-dance on the merits of a St. Dominic education. Above, Mrs. de Wit checks off the final item on a list her husband and she used when considering where to send their children to school when they arrived in Kingsport in the 1980s. View a slide show of the celebration at [dioknox.org/sdom-slideshow](http://dioknox.org/sdom-slideshow). Photo by Dan McWilliams



***Hundreds attend a pair of celebrations to show support and gratitude for the Kingsport school.***

By Dan McWilliams

The St. Dominic family in Kingsport enthusiastically turned out for two 65th-anniversary celebrations for the parish school.

More than 200 attended a dinner-dance Feb. 19 at St. Dominic Church, following a Catholic Schools Week kickoff event Jan. 30 that drew 300-plus.

The diocese announced in January 2010 that St. Dominic School would close at the end of the school year because of declining enrollment and increased subsidy costs to the parish. Bishop Richard F. Stika rescinded the decision the following month, giving the institution a two-year period to “demonstrate increased enrollment, an overall reduction in costs, and a healthy pattern of improvement,” as the *ETC* reported March 7, 2010.

“There are a lot of people who take a lot of pride in the school and what St. Dominic has been able to accomplish over the decades,” said parish pastor Father Mike Nolan. “The kids are well-trained, well-behaved, and well-respected. They know about the Lord. They know to go to him in prayer privately or publicly.

“I’m very appreciative of all the efforts that went into not only making this night successful but also trying to make our school more successful and more viable for more people.”

Father Nolan praised St. Dominic school-board chair Marie Wilson and “all the hard work of the school board, who earlier in the year were meeting weekly and then twice a month and have put in countless hours of strategizing and setting goals and finding action plans. The progress they’ve made is incredible.”

At the anniversary celebration Jan. 30, Bishop Stika celebrated Mass at the church, then joined parish families at the school for a tour, program, and lunch. Many of the families were visiting the school for the first time, said Father Nolan

“[The bishop] engaged, charged, and challenged and was a real shot in the arm to our parish community and the efforts we have made with our school,” he said.

St. Dominic School opened in 1945 as the city’s first private school, with students meeting in the basement of the original church on Crescent Drive before moving to a nearby house. The current school building on Center Street next to the old church was dedicated Sept. 12, 1951. After a fire destroyed the original church in 1983, parishioners met for Mass at the school until their new church was dedicated in 1987.



Dinner emcee and school parent Eric Kniedler quizzed his audience for several trivia answers, including the name of a famous celebrity who visited the school in 1954 (Maria Von Trapp).

The dinner-dance featured a meal catered by Giuseppe's Italian Restaurant, a PowerPoint presentation of vintage school photos, and music by The Has Beens.

The names of veteran kindergarten teacher Julie Dombroski and music teacher Joy Mullen of St. Dominic School came up several times during the dinner. Mrs. Mullen is in her 33rd year at the school. She has composed an operetta each of the last 12 years and tailors each part to the talents of the student filling the role.

"I try to make it as equal as I can, and for the students who have difficulty remembering, I just give one or two lines," she said.

Mrs. Mullen has composed a new school song, "St. Dominic, the School We Love," drawing ideas from poems submitted by students.

St. Dominic principal Debbie DePollo said she loved seeing the support the parish showed for the school by the numbers attending the dinner-dance.

"It makes them realize that we've been around for 65 years," she said. "We'd like to be around for 65 more."

Meeting the requirements to remain open is "still a challenge," said Mrs. DePollo, "but a lot of people are becoming aware that this is a good choice, and we want Catholics in the future to have that choice for their children too."

Two grades, kindergarten and first grade, "look like they're going to be full for next year," she said.

Marvin Hagey Jr., who as a first-grader in 1945 was one of the original students at St. Dominic School, attended the dinner. He recalled former pastor Father Thomas Woodley.

"I started there with Father Woodley and Sister Mary," he said. "There were three sisters down there at the school in the house before they built the [current] school in '51."

Mr. Hagey remembered serving in the safety patrol at St. Dominic and sharing a classroom with other grades.

"We had the fifth, sixth, seventh, and eighth grade all in one room."

Jean and Chuck McCort look at some of the many St. Dominic School photo albums on display during the dinner-dance. Alongside the albums were several school yearbooks, and a nearby easel included additional photos from the school's six and a half decades. Photo by Dan McWilliams

Anniversary-committee member Joanie Hrivnak, the special-education teacher at St. Dominic for 12 years, was pleased with the dinner turnout.

"We were hoping for a hundred, and we got 216," she said.

The dinner was not a fundraiser but a “proper way” to say thank-you to the parish, she said.

“We owe the parish a debt of gratitude for having us along for 65 years.”

Although Mrs. Hrivnak’s three daughters graduated from St. Dominic, she was the only one among her siblings not to attend a Catholic school, during her childhood in northern Virginia.

“My older brothers and sisters did, but when it was my turn, there were 60 children in a class, and my mom and dad wouldn’t put me in there,” she said. “I’m totally a product of public school, and my children can walk and talk circles around me about their faith. It’s really amazing what they learned and what I didn’t learn.”

School parents Jos and Mary de Wit gave a presentation during the dinner on the merits of a St. Dominic education. Mrs. de Wit checked off on a dry-erase board several points her husband and she used to determine where to enroll their children when they arrived in the city in the 1980s.

“When we moved to Kingsport, people raved about the city schools and the county schools, which is pretty unusual, and I think it makes it tough to ‘sell’ St. Dominic School in that environment,” said Mrs. de Wit. “Still, we read articles and made our checklist. We had the open house, the testimony of friends, and our own observations to rely on for answering those questions in the affirmative.”

Mr. de Wit said, looking back on the questions now that his children have graduated from St. Dominic, that the answer to each is still yes today.

“Our children were known and loved” by the teachers and staff, he said.

Mr. de Wit said that two St. Dominic teachers, Mrs. Dombroski and second-grade teacher Beverly Stone, “in particular bent over backward to celebrate the individuality of our children . . . They have been angels in our lives.”

Mr. de Wit said that a “respected counselor in a Kingsport middle school” paid the school a huge compliment earlier in the day before the dinner. The counselor “told us, ‘We always hope the vote will be to keep St. Dominic School; we need it so much. The kids who come to us from there are so good, they just bubble to the top and lift everyone else along with them.’”

Mrs. Wilson, the school-board chair, said the dinner-dance “was wonderful.” She said she would echo the above comment from the middle school counselor.

“I’ve heard from other middle school teachers and principals, and they’ve kind of summed up that the children who come from St. Dominic are well-rounded leaders within the school, and that makes me feel really proud.”