

Memories of Morning Star School

I arrived in San Francisco on October 12, 1973, and was met at the airport by Sister Margaret O'Rourke and Sister Eileen Cronin. I was totally amazed by the enormous car that they drove. It was a typical American car of the time and was big enough to transport the sisters at St. Michael's community. (Three months later the energy crisis began and cars started to downsize!) When we arrived at our convent on Pine St. I was surprised one more time. It was a beautiful Victorian building three stories high, and it also had a basement. It was the property of the Archdiocese of San Francisco. I had a great welcome from our sisters, Kathleen Flynn, Bridget Johnston and Helen Vigil.

The next morning I looked out the window and saw a beautiful blue sky and all the children playing at recess. The majority of the students were oriental. Our school, Morning Star, was started for Japanese Americans in 1929. In 1942 all the students and their families were interned in camps for the duration of World War II, so the school was opened to all ethnic groups. Our sisters visited the students and their families in Tanforan Racecourse, while they awaited their removal to the camps. Sister Josephine Leyne taught religion classes in Seabiscuit's stall!



I enjoyed my four years teaching in Morning Star. The majority of the students were not Catholic, but they all took part in religion classes each day. The students loved to go to mass, celebrated by our pastor Father Joseph Guetzloe, SVD. When the Catholic students received the Sacrament of Reconciliation, the non-Catholic students took the opportunity to chat with Father Guetzloe. The students were eager to learn in all subject areas. For a treat, my students would ask if they could do some work with bases in the afternoon, changing numbers to base 8, base 2 etc. Because I always loved math, I was very happy to oblige!

San Francisco is a city with wonderful field trip opportunities, so we got to go to the opera, the ballet, and exhibits at the de Young Memorial Museum. One of the most memorable for me was The Treasures of Early Irish Art. The docent asked my students what they had come to see. They answered, "The Book of Kells, The Cross of Cong, The Tara Brooch, and The Ardagh Chalice". She was very impressed! Sister Helen, who was the principal, learned to drive the school bus. My class had the first field trip on the bus, to the Cow Palace. As we left the school and drove down Gough St. the students sat in silence, but they broke into applause when we went onto the freeway. Sister Helen had passed the students' driving test! Interestingly enough, that day the Cow Palace featured cows, beefalo and a variety of other farm animals. In the words of the students it was a "cow beauty contest", which they all enjoyed!

The 70's had a share of interesting television shows. The girls identified with Charlie's Angels, imitating Farrah Fawcett's hairstyle and turning in papers with Jill Munroe as the author. They enjoyed the Bionic Woman and called Sister Helen the Bionic Nun, as she was able to move volleyball poles with ease! The boys thought of themselves as the Six Million Dollar Man and liked to play with their Raideen figures during recess. Some African American students rediscovered the Supremes and wanted to stay in at recess to dance to their music. One class of third grade girls just loved Pink Lady!

Another highlight at the school was the official visit of the Emperor and Empress of Japan. We walked to Japan Town to welcome them. Our students took our big Morning Star School banner and some smaller ones on Love, Peace and other topics. All the banners were in both English and Japanese. They had a choice of waving either Japanese or American flags. Pictures of the event appeared in newspapers in Japan, which was a great source of joy for some of the students' grandparents who lived there.

In those years in San Francisco a big percentage of the Japanese primary students attended Morning Star. Some had come directly from Japan and some were born in the U.S. By fifth grade some students were not able to talk with their own mothers, as the students just wanted to speak English and their mothers spoke only Japanese. To address this need Sister Helen approached the San Francisco Unified school District, which with funds from the ESAA Program provided a Japanese teacher and teacher aide and all the teaching supplies needed to teach the language. Japanese became a subject on the curriculum for any student who chose to participate.

Our convent was utilized to the maximum by the school. Japanese was taught in the library, Korean in the kitchen, ESL in the dining room, the kindergarten had their classroom in the basement, and kindergarten educational television was viewed in the community room! At lunchtime, students got in line on the kitchen stairs to have Sister Helen provide hot water for their cups of noodles! The teachers had lunch in the dining room. There was a strong spirit of respect among teachers, students and parents under the leadership of Sister Helen, our Kocho Sensei. Morning Star School was a wonderful introduction for me to teaching in the United States. It will always be a place of happy memories!



Sister Mary Walsh, DMJ