

The Story of Providence Catholic High School



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**Providence Catholic
High School**

A History of
Providence High School
in Joliet and New Lenox

by
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with
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In Appreciation

Catholic schools are not so much an institution as they are a cause, a cause people believe in and are willing to sacrifice for to preserve and protect. Providence Catholic High School is a cause. This story records the written history as well as the oral tradition of people who sacrifice themselves, their time, and their energy to preserve and protect something in which they believe. It is a living history in that it was gathered from the hearts and minds of those who helped to build and sustain Providence.

While this is a history and is accurate in so far as research and memories permit, it is much more than that. It is a living testimony to a living being, a being which is more about people than buildings and grounds. Providence High School has no meaning outside of the people who made it possible in the past and who keep it growing and improving today.

Table of Contents

<i>I. The Early Days in Joliet.....</i>	<i>Page 1</i>
<i>II. The Crisis Years.....</i>	<i>Page 5</i>
<i>III. The Turnaround.....</i>	<i>Page 10</i>
<i>IV. Expansion.....</i>	<i>Page 13</i>
<i>V. The Three R's: Revision, Renovation, and Recruitment.....</i>	<i>Page 21</i>
<i>Appendix I. Athletic History.....</i>	<i>Page 25</i>
<i>Appendix II. Builders.....</i>	<i>Page 28</i>

The Story of Providence Catholic High School

I. The Early Days

Most successful institutions have a unique story and an interesting history. This is the story of Providence, including its earliest days in Joliet, the move to New Lenox, the crisis and heroic effort to save it, its turnaround, and its striking growth. If one thinks about it, it is pretty presumptuous to call a school "Providence," a name which means "God provides." In other words, Providence means God has a plan, and Providence Catholic High School is part of that plan.

In 1880 a religious order of sisters known as The Ladies of Loretto, now called the IBVM Sisters, came from Toronto, Ontario, Canada to teach the children of quarry, canal, and railroad workers in Joliet. They staffed schools at Sacred Heart, St. Bernard and St. Patrick parishes. The Sisters of Loretto were originally founded as a group to educate girls. That is why Providence High School began as a girls' school. They had come from their founding in England in the 17th Century to Ireland and then to Canada in 1847.

The Sisters were sponsored by Fr. H. Walter Power, Pastor of St. Patrick's in Joliet. They arrived without money and staff and had to start from scratch. Fr. Power located them in a small unfurnished house until he could open a school where, at night, the classrooms became dormitories for the Sisters. On September 8th, 1880, a select commercial and finishing school for girls was opened in Joliet.

After the Sisters spent a year at St. Patrick in Joliet, they transferred to St. Mary of Joliet. St. Mary Parish on Ottawa Street was sometimes known as St. Mary Irish and in 1933 the name was changed to St. Mary Carmelite when the Carmelite Fathers assumed responsibility for staffing the parish. The Sisters

and the school for St. Mary were housed in a small place on the corner of Cass and Ottawa Streets until the new high school building, St. Mary Academy, was completed and dedicated on August 16, 1883.



The Ottawa Street campus in downtown Joliet.

From 1880 until 1919, the Ladies of Loretto remained in the city of Joliet. After 1900, they gave up one school after another until 1918 when they gave up the high school to the Sisters of Providence. They remained for one more year only at the grade school at St. Mary.

The Sisters of Providence had come from Ruil , France to a one room farm house and corn loft in the middle of the Indiana Woods on October 22, 1840. Leading the six missionary teachers was Mother Theodore Guerin, a candidate for beatification. Mother Guerin was decorated by the French Government as an outstanding educator.

In 1918, the Joliet Diocese was part of the Archdiocese of Chicago under the direction of Cardinal Mundelein. He wrote to Mother Mary Cleophas in August, asking the Sisters of Providence to come to the city of Joliet, which at that time had 28,000 Catholics.

Although it was very short notice, the Sisters of Providence sent five sisters to staff the parish high school and to teach the 59 students with the understanding that their arrangement was for one year only. The first sisters sent were Sr. Aloyse Hennessey, Sr. Alexis Gillis, Sr. Philomene Cullity, Sr. Alma Therese Schaefer and Sr. Mary Reparata Ryan.

On October 22, 1918, the name of the high school was officially changed to Providence High School. The first graduating class consisted of six members, while eight received certificates from the commercial class. At the end of that first year, the last of the Ladies of Loretto withdrew from the grade school. The pastor appealed to the Sisters of Providence to take over the grade school as well as to continue in the high school. The sisters felt that they would not be able to meet the needs of another school, hard pressed as they were to staff the schools they had. Generally speaking, there were no lay teachers in Catholic schools at that time. Once again, Cardinal Mundelein intervened and insisted that the sisters staff the school. In

order to do this, they transferred some sisters from Our Lady of Perpetual Help in Chicago and from another parish in Lockport to Joliet. The Loretto Academy building was repaired and remodeled for the Sisters of Providence. The high school was on Ottawa Street in Joliet. The academic department of the high school was closed in 1931 at the height of the Great

Depression, although there were 120

graduates that year. The depression had brought about many changes in Joliet and a number of industries had withdrawn from the area. Because of the economic problems, those directing the school decided in 1932 to change the school from a four year general high school to a two year commercial school. In 1933, one year of general education before beginning the commercial course became a requirement. A four year secretarial course was initiated in 1938.

In 1933, the old high school building had to be abandoned because it was condemned as unsafe by the Joliet Fire Marshall. The conditions under which the sisters had lived for 79 years had apparently gone unnoticed by

others, even the priests under whom they served. In the announcement made to the parish about the closing of the old facility, Fr. Fabian Donlan, the Carmelite pastor, said, "The Fire Marshall, City Officials and the priests were shocked to see the conditions that the good sisters had been living in all these years."

From 1959 to 1962 the school was temporarily located at St. Mary Nativity Parish under the pastor, Fr. Aloysius Sinsky. Providence High School shared the building with St. Mary



Homecoming 1959

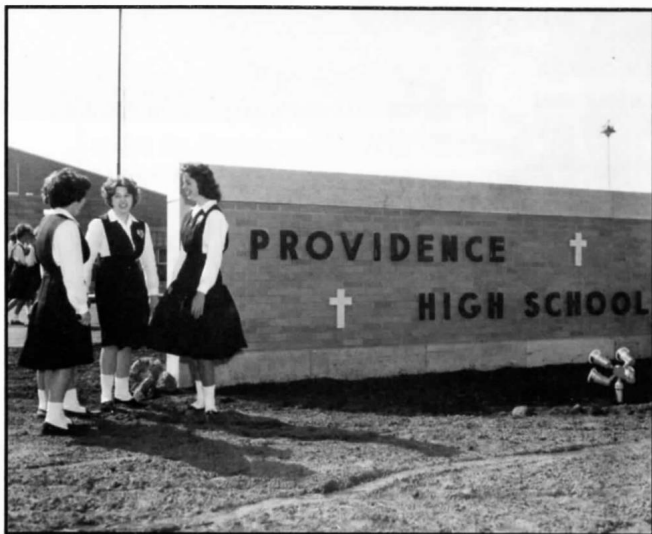


Construction of the New Lenox campus began in May of 1961.



One of the classrooms on Ottawa Street in 1952.

Nativity elementary school, which was directed by the Franciscan Sisters of Christ the King from Lemont, Illinois. When the old building was demolished, it is said that students sifted through the wreckage looking for bricks that were not crushed. They wrapped the bricks and sold them as souvenirs to help build the new Providence.



Barbara Cimino, Judy Levandowski, and Marsha Martin are pictured in front of the newly opened New Lenox campus.

In 1962, the new Providence High School opened in New Lenox. The girls were transferred from their temporary location at St. Mary Nativity and, for the first time, boys were admitted to Providence, making the

school co-institutional. The Sisters of Providence taught the girls and the Christian Brothers taught the boys. Brother Joel Darnier, FSC, was responsible for building Providence High School at the New Lenox location. John Warren, a graduate of a Christian Brothers High School, St. Mel in Chicago, was the neighbor of Providence to the south. He worked with Brother Joel. He owned all the property on which Providence was built.

On May 12, 1963, Right Reverend Monsignor Romeo Blanchette, Vicar General and Chancellor, dedicated Providence High School. Brother J. Edmund, FSC, was the director of the school, assisted by Brother Ralph. Sister Marie Loretta, SP, (who later became Sr. Julia Shea), headed the girls' department. The cost of construction of the original building of Providence High School in New Lenox was \$1,036,836.34. It was built with a capacity for 800. In 1962, Providence had a student body of about 340. The boys' section was in the west wing of the building, and they used the short lockers which housed their shorter coats. The girls' section was toward the

current science and math classrooms in the east wing, and they used the longer lockers put in for their longer coats. In 1963, Providence graduated 21 girls. Both boys and girls shared the use of the gymnasium, cafeteria, and main office. It was not until the school year 1965-66 that Providence first held co-educational classes. In 1966, the first co-educational class graduated from Providence. In the school year 1969-70, approximately 552 students attended Providence.

II. The Crisis

By 1969, however financial problems threatened to close Providence. The number of students was shrinking while the costs of education were rising. The Administration did not want to raise tuition and could not afford a faculty salary raise. Bus service at this time was very limited. The one bus that ran picked up students in Wilmington and brought them north to Providence. The school used the Suburban Bus Service of Joliet. The school did not draw many students from the adjacent areas. Providence had no established tradition in the new building as Joliet Catholic and St. Francis Academy did. People were heard to say, "What's Providence?" when the subject of area high schools was discussed. There was no Development Office or recruitment.

Meanwhile, Lincoln-Way Central campus was built, and the school district was considering another campus. Sacred Heart Academy existed in Mokena; it was an all girls' school with an enrollment of approximately 250. Joliet East and Central campuses were Providence's primary competition. The Catholic population of Joliet sent their children primarily to Joliet Catholic and St. Francis Academy. Opinion was that the Providence school building may have been built "too big." It was built because of speculation that there would be growth in the southern suburbs of Chicago. At that time Frankfort, Mokena, New Lenox, and Homer Township had not yet begun developing as rapidly as had been projected.

The Christian Brothers had several high schools in the area. They had started at Lewis College (later University) and then spread out into high schools. Because of enrollment and financial problems, they were faced with the task of deciding which high schools to close. As religious pulled out of their positions, their salaries had to be replaced with higher lay teacher salaries. Tuition at Providence was approximately \$330 per student. Providence had a \$97,000 deficit for the 1968-69 school year. The entire educational/secondary school deficit in the Diocese for the year was approximately

\$450,000. Providence, by itself, was responsible for more than twenty percent of the educational deficit of the entire Joliet Diocese. Providence also had a "girls' school" reputation.

A group of people, including the Diocesan Superintendent of

"Get these people the hell out of here!!"

-Bro. Dan McMullen, principal 1964-1969, when he confronted the delegation including Lincoln-Way officials and Fr. Niles Gillen-

Schools, was appointed to evaluate Providence High School. The Superintendent led a tour of Lincoln-Way officials through Providence during a school day. Lincoln-Way was hoping to develop a western campus and a common

thought at the time was that the Providence building would be a great western campus. Providence students started to cry when they discovered that the Lincoln-Way officials were touring the building. Brother Dan McMullen, the Christian Brother who was principal at the time, confronted the Superintendent and said, "Get these people the hell out of here." Brother Dan was principal at Providence from 1964-1969. He was replaced by Brother Kevin in 1969. In spite of valiant efforts by the Parents' Clubs and faculty, things were not going well and a parent went to Bishop Blanchette to ask for help. They pleaded with him to save Providence. Bishop supposedly was quoted as saying, "If I close Providence, it will be because it's the school in the Diocese to close."

A statement that seemed to stir people to action was made by An Baron, a financial consultant to the board of evaluation appointed by Bishop Blanchette. He said, "If Providence High School is marketable, close Providence." This meant that if the board commissioned by Bishop Blanchette evaluated Providence and wanted to close it, it seemed that Providence would be in the most income and would probably be sold immediately. In his evaluation of Providence, the Superintendent said, "We are talking about the survival of Catholic secondary education in the Diocese of Joliet." The point was that Providence might have to close to assure the survival of Catholic secondary education. The thought was that students at Providence High School could be assimilated into St. Francis Academy and Joliet Catholic.

At the time, St. Francis Academy was the largest school in the Diocese with an enrollment of 1,048. Joliet Catholic was

geographically centrally located with an enrollment of 682. Providence had an enrollment of 552. Immaculate Conception of Elmhurst and Driscoll of Addison were also evaluated. Immaculate Conception had an enrollment of 577 and Driscoll had an enrollment of 391. Montini High School had been built by the Christian Brothers in Lombard.

In the fall of 1969, after Providence's Open House, the Diocesan Board of Education was invited to a special meeting at Providence with the Providence Board and Student Council. Fr. Niles Gillen was the Superintendent of Schools. The Diocesan Board of Education articulated their concerns about the cost to the Diocese of subsidizing Catholic high schools. The Diocesan Board Members expressed their concerns about the escalating cost of Catholic education. There was lively debate. To these concerns, Pat Fitzgerald, Jr., the treasurer of the Student Council, replied, "You people say Catholic education is

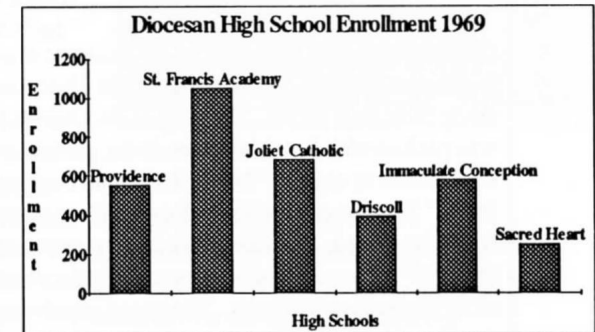
important, don't you have any faith? On that note, the meeting was adjourned.

The Christian Brothers formed their own evaluation board for Providence.

Brother Dan

McMullen said that the Christian Brothers board was "enamored with Providence High School" because of the school spirit there. Brother Dan stepped down from being Principal in 1969, but remained at Providence teaching United States History. Because of the problems faced by the school, Brother Dan seriously considered taking a leave of absence from the Christian Brothers so that he could once again be principal of Providence and do everything he could to save it from closing. Brother Dan said, "We could see in the future the potential for drawing students at Providence High School. We thought it would be a terrible mistake to close Providence."

On two or three separate occasions, the Diocesan Board of Education recommended to Bishop Blanchette that he close Providence High School and one of the DuPage County High Schools. However, the Diocesan Board of Education was only advisory to the Bishop. Unfortunately, the Diocesan Board recommendations to the Bishop were made public before the Bishop had made a final decision.



Pastorally, the closing of Providence would have been disastrous. There was a perception, that still exists, that the Church favors the wealthier west side of Joliet, not the east side. The perception would have been that the Church is interested in the 'silk stocking' Catholics of the west side, not the 'blue collar' workers of the east side.

Bishop Blanchette was besieged by sincerely convinced people on both sides of the issues. The Diocesan Board of Consulters urged him not to close Providence for pastoral reasons. His Diocesan Board of Education urged him to close it for financial reasons. The Bishop called an emergency four hour special joint meeting of the boards together from 8:00 PM to midnight and he asked that all members have their say at that meeting which he attended. He also asked no further communications be sent to him by either side for at least 48 hours while he weighed all the advice and made his decision.

On Tuesday, January 13, 1969, in a historic meeting at St. Charles Borromeo Seminary, Fr. Gillen and the Diocesan Evaluation Board made their final report. The gym at St. Charles Borromeo Seminary was packed with Providence students, parents and faculty. Fr. Gillen was quoted as saying, "I feel like Daniel coming into the den of lions." The committee's year long study recommended that Providence be closed. Fr. Gillen said that the committee had to "deal with the facts" and could not be governed by the emotional spirit which ruled students and parents. The board unanimously recommended that Providence and Driscoll be closed. Immaculate Conception and Montini were also considered for closing at this time.

"I feel like Daniel coming into the den of lions."

-Fr. Niles Gillen as he entered the St. Charles Borromeo Seminary and saw the turnout of Providence students and supporters.-

bleachers, which they courteously and immediately did. The whole letter of three to four pages was read with the decision saved for the end. Bishop Blanchette decided that Providence would remain opened. The Providence family went wild with joy. The Diocesan

Fr. Dan Ryan, the Chancellor, read the response from Bishop Blanchette to the audience. The teachers were so jammed that the Providence students were asked to sit on the floor so the adults could sit in the

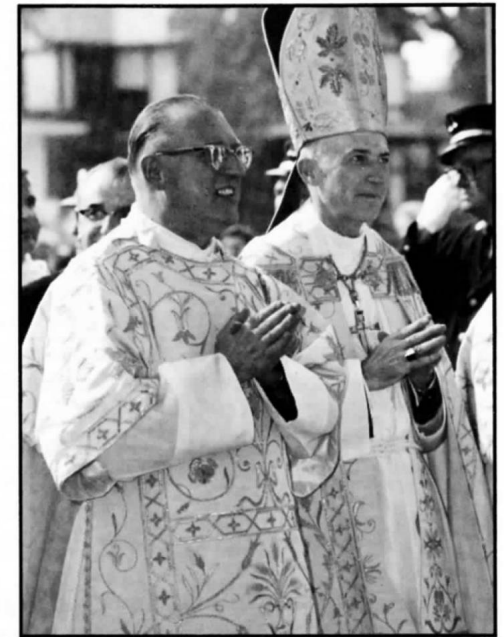
Board of Education was taken aback and one of their members resigned in protest that their unanimous recommendation had been ignored.

Bishop Blanchette disregarded the recommendation of his own committee. He followed the recommendation of the Diocesan Board of Consulters and the Diocesan Pastoral Council. Many people said that decision to close Providence was a good financial decision but a bad pastoral decision.

Bishop Blanchette was a pastoral bishop; thus, he would quite naturally lean toward the pastoral decision. There were several other factors involved in this decision. It is said that Bishop Blanchette knew "people needed a good Catholic school on Joliet's east side." Bishop Blanchette himself said, "We must care for the spiritual welfare of our people."

Factually, Joliet Catholic and St. Francis Academy did not serve a minority population. Providence took almost everybody at that time and had an extraordinary school spirit. Providence had considerably more minority students than did Joliet Catholic and St. Francis Academy. Most lived closer to Providence and were probably more comfortable having some friends at Providence. Providence has always been a friendly place and quite color blind. In any case, the final decision to keep Providence open rested on the following conditions:

1. Providence was expected to raise between \$35,000 and \$51,000 yearly to help pay off its debt. (The amount is disputed.)
2. Providence had to maintain the number of religious teachers serving on the faculty and to obtain religious to replace those who were leaving.
3. Providence must maintain its enrollment.



Bishop Blanchette was advised by his committee to close Providence.



As part of the agreement, Providence was required to maintain religious teachers serving on the faculty. Dominican Sisters, such as Sr. Mary George, taught at Providence.

In addition, Bishop Blanchette appointed Fr. Roger Kaffer to be Providence's principal. Fr. Kaffer was appointed on May 1, 1970, coinciding with the 16th anniversary of his ordination as a priest. It was said that Fr. Kaffer was "up and coming" in the Catholic church in Joliet, so Bishop Blanchette was in fact appointing one of the Diocese's finest people.

III. The Turnaround

An extraordinary fund raising campaign began entitled S.O.S. - Save Our School. The Save Our School struggle appeared in the Chicago Daily News, Thursday, November 21, 1968, when students raised the first \$30,000 selling 25 cent chances. In that year, 557 students at Providence had helped save a six year old school from extinction. The Student Council took a leading role selling chances for a car raffle. This raffle was the precursor to the Harvest Drive. Several teachers including Matt Senffner, Ken Raymond, Tom Kennedy, Tom Dedin and Pat Sullivan were involved. Jim Walzak and Ken Raymond worked hard to collect ads. Ads sold by students were printed on posters displayed on the gym walls during the three day Harvest Drive Party with game booths, food and other fun things to help make money for the Harvest Drive. These events were run by the parents' clubs; at that time they were called the Mothers' Club and the Providence Boosters' Club. Later, the book came into being as the Celtic Journal in the mid 70's and was connected to the basketball and wrestling championships the school enjoyed at that time.

The second annual fund raiser to help Providence was the Cead Mile Failte - the 'one hundred thousand welcomes'. This was predecessor to the annual dinner dance/auction. The first dinner, Cead Mile Failte was held at Lewis University. Originally, the tables for this event were sold to businessmen in the Joliet area. It was not primarily a parents' activity. Later, waitresses were recruited from the Mothers' Club for the elegant dinner. China was rented from a

caterer for the occasion. Everyone told Father Kaffer he could never make a success of such an ambitious fund raiser, but he proved them wrong. Also, the Mothers' Club put on style shows every spring to help raise money for the school.

A student from Providence wrote a letter to a serviceman in Viet Nam. It was a desperate effort as students attempted to write or contact anybody they knew who could contribute to their fund raising. Essentially the letter said, "Please help us keep our school open!" The serviceman who received this letter had heard of the disrespect for institutions in the United States during the Viet Nam War. The Viet Nam soldiers were well aware of kids throwing bricks through the windows of schools, especially on college campuses in the United States, and the disenchantment with the war. He was very impressed that there was a student attempting to keep his school open. The serviceman sent a donation but more importantly, he submitted the letter to *Stars and Stripes* Magazine. *Star and Stripes* published the letter, and Providence received contributions from Viet Nam servicemen.

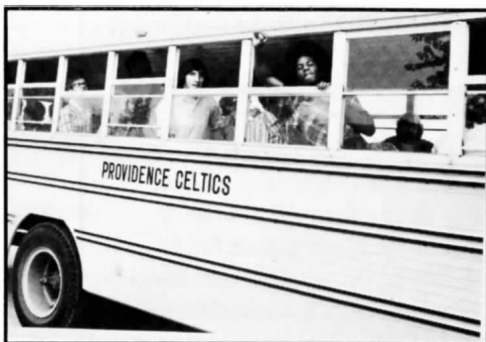
When he became Principal, Fr. Kaffer understood that the reputation of Providence was not very good. People told him the word on the street was that the faculty was incompetent, the library was inadequate, and the

science department was ill-equipped. Fr. Kaffer asked Dr. John Lynch, Dean of the School of Education at DePaul University, to come at night to review faculty credentials, to evaluate the library, to investigate the

science labs and to tell him straight from the shoulder if those accusations were accurate and needed to be addressed, or if they were incorrect and needed to be refuted. Dr. Lynch reported on each of the three charges that the allegations were false.



Mr. and Mrs. F. Leo Woldvogel and Mr. and Mrs. Tom Dedin.



Buses were hired to attract enrollment from further edges of the area.

Fr. Kaffer knew that to increase enrollment he had to get buses. So he began hiring buses to attract students from the further edges of the area.

In 1971, Sacred Heart School in Mokena closed and some of the students came to Providence. Fr. Kaffer tried to make the transition of students from Sacred Heart to Providence a smooth one.

The closing of Sacred Heart enabled Providence to become better known in communities east of New Lenox. Many of the girls who came to Providence from Sacred Heart in Mokena had younger brothers and sisters and it was, naturally, more convenient for parents to have all their children in the same school.

Fr. Kaffer, usually with Sr. Julia Shea and Pat Sullivan, visited every parish in the area and every feeder school from Orland to Joliet. They met with the principal, pastor, and the school board president at every site so they could talk to people about Providence. Fr. Kaffer also began home visitations. He visited the home of every incoming freshman, at times making appointments, and at times just dropping in. He would stop in, visit with the family, and pray the Litany of the Sacred Heart.

In 1971, the total school enrollment was 490. In 1974-75, there were 121 graduates with a total of 735 students. In the year 1975-76, there was a total school population of 785. In the 1976-77 school year, the number of students was kept below 750 so that Providence would remain in Class A for competition in athletics. By 1983-84, there were over 836 students in the building.

One of the most significant people in the history of Providence was Sr. Julia Shea, S.P. Then known as Sister Marie Loretta, she was the Principal of Providence in downtown Joliet when it was condemned by the fire department. She skillfully guided it through the difficult years when it was a school without a home at St. Mary Nativity, while the New Lenox campus was under construction. She collaborated with then Monsignor Romeo Blanchette, Vicar General of the Diocese, and Brother Joel Damien, FSC, the brilliant Christian Brother who built the New Lenox Campus (and many other schools in his career). She worked on the co-institutional agreement between

the Sisters of Providence, the Christian Brothers and the diocese at the new campus. Generously, she relinquished her role as Principal in deference to the first Principal at the new campus, Brother Edmund Burke, FSC, since the Brothers would legally own and operate the school.

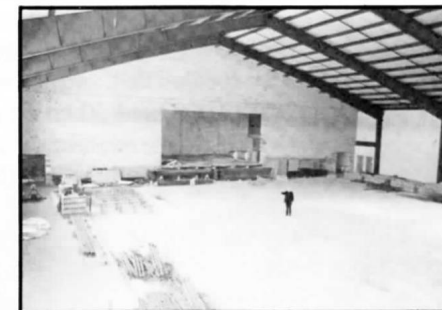
After her pioneer work was accomplished, she was transferred to California. In 1971, Father Kaffer begged her to return to assist him with getting back on course the troubled ship she had so successfully helped launch.

IV. Expansion

Students worked like slaves to save and to build Providence as did parents and faculty. The Joliet Herald News cited Providence's "do it yourself" mentality. There is ample evidence of that in its history. In the early 1970's Fr. Kaffer wanted a larger gym in addition to the immaculate Heart of Mary Gym. Bishop Blanchette told him to make it the same size as the IHM gym. Fr. Kaffer fought this and talked Bishop Blanchette into a larger gym, the Sacred Heart Gym, by convincing him that it could serve as a Catholic parish in case a parish would be constructed on the same property. Thus, the gym was built bigger. The Sacred Heart Gym was built by many volunteers. Val and Sue Mores, Providence parents, cooked breakfast at 4:00 AM on weekends for workers who began at 6:00 AM. Every Saturday workers showed up. "None of us ever got paid," they said. The cost of the gym was estimated at \$1.2 million. It was built for \$475,000. Without the help of Ben Cabay and his workers, trucks and machinery, there would have been no Sacred Heart Gym nor many other projects. The Joliet Herald News was quoted as saying, "Volunteers received free lunch, beer and on the spot vocational training."

The sequence of the building additions was:

- 1st wrestling room (now the weight room)
- 2nd six classrooms on the south end
- 3rd Sacred Heart gym
- 4th kitchen addition



Fr. Kaffer standing in the middle of the Sacred Heart Gym while under construction.



Gary Bebar, as Charlie Celtic, leads the cheers.

Tom Dedin was the central figure in the building of the Sacred Heart Gym. He did it all - brick, plumbing, electrical and what he didn't know he learned. He spent an incredible number of hours helping to build the gym. He also built the great athletic program at Providence. He was the first Athletic Director, soccer coach, basketball coach, baseball coach, and one of the best teachers in the school. He was an extraordinary English teacher. Tom Dedin inspired his coaches to strive for academic excellence by being an excellent teacher himself.

Building the football, soccer and baseball fields were herculean projects. The football field

required cutting a nine foot trench into the hill on the southeast corner of the football field and placing four feet of fill in the northwest corner of the field. Then the adjacent ball park was built on a field which had to be made level. All this was done using equipment and manpower provided by John Warren Excavating and George Deitter.

The Booster Club was organized by Brother Edmund, Tom Dedin and Len Wedic in 1964. Stan Keto was the first President. The first year paid membership of the Booster Club was 143 at \$3.00 a head. Meetings were held the first Thursday of each month.

The Booster Club had everything to do with the many projects completed in the building years, raising funds all through the years in different ways. Len Wedic, Booster Club President from 1968 - 1978, and his wife, Lynn, were first chairpersons of the Skylight Dance. The name was taken from the skylights in the old gym. It was a big success.

Len Wedic donated the victory light. It was first lit with a basketball victory over Roncalli High School from Aurora.

The Booster Club worked at all athletic events and home games. Each June, the Booster Club had an annual steak fry dinner. Providence even had students appear on *It's Academic* in

Chicago.

Fr. Kaffer asked Len Wedic to start Bingo at Providence to raise money for the new school roof. With the cooperation of the Booster members, it was started in the fall of 1974. The profit amounted to \$50,000 in three years. Bingo started in the cafeteria and four months later was moved to the gym. Bingo continued until 1991.

The members of the Booster Club worked through the years on the wrestling room, the new gym, the Providence reclining cross, flower gardens, dances, athletic events and dinners, Fall Festivals, Homecomings, construction of the baseball dugouts, field maintenance, parking, tickets to sporting events, horse show, carnival, and rummage sales as well as providing men for the Mothers' Club style show. They were active in all the fund raisers in the Save Our School Fund Drive. The Booster Club held contests to have students come up with the school mascot and emblem. The award was a \$25 savings bond. The emblem selected was submitted by Ed Olsta; the mascot became known as Charlie Celtic. The Booster Club sponsored early athletic banquets and gave away trophies to the outstanding athletes for the various sports programs at the school. The Booster Club was well regarded by all students. It was the best Booster Club in the state.

Will Harder designed the unique 18' reclining cross that graces the low wall in front of Providence High School. The idea was conceived by Providence Booster Club president, Len Wedic, who had been thinking about something for the wall for a long time. The cross was an ideal Providence contribution to the 25th anniversary of the Diocese of Joliet. Mr. Wedic got eleven people to chip in to finance the expense of the cross. He raised the money in a week. The trademark Providence reclining cross was dedicated on September 27, 1973.

An amusing story is told by Brother Dan and Pat Sullivan and confirmed by Fr. Kaffer about the school's involvement with the DeRance Foundation. The DeRance Foundation was administered



Art Melcher (l) and Len Wedic (r) with the help of Tom Dedin and Bro. Edmund, started the Boosters' Club in 1964.



The Cross in front of Providence was dedicated on September 27, 1973.

through the Miller High Life Brewing Co. from Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Even though the foundation was in Milwaukee, it didn't invest in Milwaukee's schools. Brother Dan knew the person who was in charge of administering the DeRance Foundation, Harry John, but even though the Christian Brothers knew him, they didn't get much support from Harry. Brother Dan knew that Harry had a devotion to the Sacred Heart, and so he passed this

information on to Fr. Kaffer to see if Fr. Kaffer could get a donation from Harry. On the drive to Milwaukee, Pat Sullivan and Fr. Kaffer prayed the Rosary. Sully said it was the first and only time in his life he'd ever prayed the Rosary in a car on the way to an appointment. Sully and Fr. Kaffer made their appeal to the Administrative Secretary for the DeRance Foundation and they got nowhere. On the way out, they looked for the washroom before heading for Chicago. They ran into a man who was dressed rather shabbily. They began to speak and discovered to their surprise that this man, who was making repairs in the men's washroom, was Harry John. Fr. Kaffer gave Harry John his business card which said, "What on earth are you doing for heaven's sake?" and featured a picture of the Sacred Heart. Now you have to realize that Harry John was very conservative in his investing. He took a liking to the business card because of his own devotion to the Sacred Heart. The DeRance Foundation usually did not give to projects such as athletic facilities, but Fr. Kaffer's first check from him was for \$40,000.

Later, a Brother Murphy was sent from the DeRance Foundation to check up on its investment at Providence. The day he showed up was the day that Fr. Kaffer's hand got caught in the tailgate of a dump truck. Father went to Silver Cross Hospital and received 27 stitches to close his wound. Father returned to work and was sitting on a back hoe digging a hole where the gym was to be built. Brother Murphy got out of his car and he asked the first person he saw, "Where's Fr. Kaffer?" The person pointed to the guy on the back hoe and said, "That's him." It is said that Brother Murphy turned right around and got in his car. Very shortly after, another major donation of \$25,000 was made.

A \$500 a plate testimonial dinner for Bishop Blanchette's 10th anniversary as Bishop of Joliet was held to raise funds for the gym. A personal

representative from the White House attended. The Providence Mothers' Club, under the leadership of Sue Mores, catered an elegant black tie dinner. Among the guests at the head table, in addition to President Ford's personal representative, was Lt. Governor Neil Hartigan, U.S. Representative George O'Brien, most of the Catholic bishops of Illinois, and Secretary of State Michael Howlett who was the Master of Ceremonies. Over \$200,000 in foundation gifts and tickets were realized that evening. The one who really organized the \$500 a plate fund raiser was Margaret Videtick, the executive secretary for several Providence principals. The 19,000 square foot large gymnasium was opened and dedicated to the Sacred Heart in 1977.

The Theology Wing

The Theology wing was built by hand in the early 1970s. It was estimated to cost \$50,000 to build. In reality, the furnished wing cost a total of \$22,000. One person said that they worked for nothing, but the greatest payment they would receive is Fr. Kaffer coming out at lunch with a beer and sandwiches. It meant the world to the workers because that is all that Fr. Kaffer had to offer and the workers knew it. Fr. Kaffer worked right along with the volunteers after changing clothes several times on a Saturday as he went from construction to fund raising, hearing confessions at the parish where he lived, and going back to construction work.



Sr. Catherine, a Servite Sister, in the Theology wing addition.

The Bishop Blanchette Library

The original building plans called for the eventual addition of a library in front of the school where the present building now stands. The first library was housed in two classrooms. In 1971, as enrollment began to rise, a third room was needed. Instead of taking away from classroom space, the Christian Brothers residence, which was empty that year, became the school's functioning library up until the dedication of the Bishop Blanchette Library in 1984. After the Blanchette Library was built, the Augustinians moved into the Christian Brothers residence. In 1978, a library fund drive was planned for 1980 with a \$500 a plate testimonial dinner on Bishop Blanchette's 50th anniversary. He



Fr. Kaffer breaks ground on the Bishop Blachette Library.

cooperated in supporting the idea. Both the economy and the Bishop's health blocked the plan. When the Bishop died, it was decided to name the library after him and to include in it a memorabilia room with his personal effects, writings and tapes.

The project, originally calling for a \$1 million expenditure, was streamlined. The initial idea of including a counseling center was dropped and a maximum figure of \$650,000 was used for the construction. Bishop Kaffer raised the funds with the help of benefactors.

The Kitchen

The Mothers' Club rented out the cafeteria almost every weekend to raise money. They

catered weddings, dinner dances, and funerals for up to 500 people. They contributed between \$3,400 and \$10,000 annually over several years of fund raising. One year the catering took in \$47,000; after that, catering was limited to two times a month. Corridor dividers were used in the cafeteria to separate workers who were cooking from the guests who were dining. The present kitchen facilities were not in existence. The kitchen was actually located in the current maintenance room and there wasn't enough room to cook and set up a place for dishes and for serving. Refrigerators and stoves in the kitchen were donated by families as they replaced their older models. Late in the 1979 school year, Fr. Kaffer and parents worked long hours putting in the new kitchen. They worked until 12:30 AM, and sometimes stayed until 3 or 4 AM. The estimated cost for the kitchen was \$80,000; it was completed for \$40,000 in 1980.

Athletic Additions

The Wrestling-Gymnastics room (now the Weight Room) and

corresponding attached locker rooms were estimated to cost \$60,000. Providence Booster Club volunteers built them for \$4,500. These projects were spearheaded by the Providence Booster Club with the generous collaboration of Will County building and trade unions, architects, suppliers and contractors who donated labor, materials and equipment.

Donations and Volunteers

Len Wedic, Booster Club President said, "In order to stay good, you have to keep getting better." Mr. Wedic was one of Providence's mainstay supporters in Boosters for most of the turbulent years and he was the primary public relations person and unofficial Development Director during this time.

Len Wedic remained as President of the Booster Club long after his daughter graduated. He had a real spirit and never say die attitude that was necessary during the tough times. He would not take no for an answer. His leadership in the Booster Club was instrumental in keeping all the volunteerism alive during the building years. The times of these struggles were great times in retrospect. People, parents, faculty, and students all genuinely came together to make something they all believed in strongly work. The most important moments in life are the struggles not the triumphs.

Fr. Kaffer worked for investments and raised funds in the following way: he would go to a company that made concrete blocks and ask for a donation to the gym or the Theology wing or whatever the project was. The company would gladly donate their product, but wouldn't donate transportation to and from, or the material to make the product. So their donation depended on other things. Fr. Kaffer would then go to the steel mills to get slag to make the brick and they would gladly contribute it if someone would volunteer a truck to haul it. Fr. Kaffer then went and got someone who would donate a truck to haul it back and forth. So, through all these inter-connecting deals,



The Grotto in the courtyard at Providence was built in 1978.

the work got done.

The cooperation and collaboration of the unions, contractors, industries and businesses was so widespread as to defy individual mention. Yet the donations of several others amounted to tens of thousands of dollars: P.T.Ferro Construction Company, Ben Cabay Construction (Father Kaffer carried the key to Ben Cabay's shop for seven years), Crown-Trygg, Adler Roofing, Crowther Roofing, architects Loran Schonbachler and Watson Healy, Welsch Concrete, Lockport Iron, Joliet Concrete, Stephens Sheet Metal, Lockwood Furnace, Plainfield Furnace, Joliet Plumbing, Tri-Star Cabinet, and many bricklayers, plasterers, plumbers, cement masons, crane



Fr. Kaffer held the keys to Ben Cabay's shop for over seven years on his key chain.

operators, roofers, painters, iron workers, electricians, carpenters, - from whom bills were never received. This explanation by no means includes everyone who helped and contributed mightily to the building of Providence. Many other names have been left out as they are too numerous to mention. To those who have been omitted from this text, the authors apologize.

The Football Stadium

The football stadium cost \$60,000 to build, including a concession stand. The track around it and the surrounding land was excavated and graded by Brown and Lambrecht, who also secured and hauled fill, provided earth moving equipment, trucks, and operators worth tens of thousands of dollars for both the gym and the track.

Fr. Kaffer Departs

In 1984, the Bishop Blanchette Memorial Library and The Christopher Cooper Computer Center were built several years ahead of schedule, thanks to significant donations received from the local community. At this time, Fr. Kaffer had completed his final building project at Providence, leaving a legacy of leadership, spiritual growth and building improvements. In the spring of 1985, Fr. Kaffer was

named Assistant Bishop of Joliet by Pope John Paul II. This promotion signified that he would no longer be directly involved in Providence High School.

Fr. Kaffer was called the Number One Man in the Diocese at the time. He had, and still has, a real work ethic. Fr. Kaffer was quoted by several sources as saying, "My parish is Providence." Bishop Blanchette wanted Providence to survive and that is why he appointed "the best man in the Diocese." Another quote from Fr. Kaffer is, "Things are never as important as people."

In Father Kaffer's farewell to the Providence family, he acknowledged that by working together, Providence was known and respected statewide. But he predicted, under Augustinian leadership, it would become a national paradigm for Catholic education. He admitted his priorities were spiritual, academic and extra-curricular in that order. He could galvanize support and enthusiasm for building, but was unenthused about maintenance and both unobservant and unconcerned about details of many kinds. He preferred to be pastor rather than Principal - and he readily admits he stubbornly reversed the decades long dream of the athletic department for a lighted stadium, lest funds gathered for the third priority (extra-curricular) diminish those available for the top priority (spiritual) and the second priority (academic). Hence, he was delighted that his successor, Father Richard McGrath, not only shared his vision, but had visions and competencies of his own that would help skyrocket Providence to even greater achievements.

V. The Three R's: Revision, Renovation, and Recruitment

In 1983, the Augustinians from the Midwest Province of Our Mother of Good Counsel began a search for an additional high school. The Augustinians owned and operated St. Rita High School on Chicago's southwest side since 1905, and in 1982, handed over the operation of Mendel Catholic High School at 111th and King Drive to the Archdiocese of Chicago. They also operated Cascia Hall Preparatory School in Tulsa, Oklahoma. With three schools in the Midwest, they were eager to find a fourth location to work in secondary education.

Letters were sent to the Bishops of twenty-five dioceses across the United States inquiring whether or not they might have a Catholic

high school for the Augustinians to staff. At this time, the Augustinians were not looking for the ownership of a school, but rather to provide a core team to staff the school: a Principal, Pastoral



Fr. Richard J. McGrath, O.S.A., first Augustinian Principal (85-94) and first President (94-present.)

Director, Guidance Counselor and other staff members as might be available from the Augustinian Provincial. From the twenty-five letters, there were ten responses. After investigation, the Augustinians reduced the list to three.

Providence was third on the list behind two other schools in the Midwest. After visiting the three schools and discussing the options, the Augustinians ranked Providence High School in the Joliet Diocese as their first choice. Working in conjunction with Bishop Imesch and Fr. Kaffer, the Augustinians signed a five year renewable contract to staff the school on a management

team model. The first three Augustinians were sent to Providence in the fall of 1984 to work in the school and to initiate the transition to Augustinian leadership. Fr. Kaffer remained the Principal for the final year of Diocesan direction. In June, 1985, Fr. Richard McGrath became the first Augustinian Principal.

The Augustinians hoped to maintain the atmosphere of Providence High School and its traditions, yet make it a first class academic powerhouse and the leading Catholic school in the northern part of the state. Fr. McGrath organized a formal school Administration based on the standard Augustinian model of Principal, Assistant Principal, and Department Chairpersons who met regularly to manage and operate the school. He had three priorities:

1. To maintain and enhance the Catholic nature of the school through religious studies, retreat programs, school wide Masses and other religious opportunities.
2. To organize the school academically and implement changes which would emphasize a college preparatory program and raise the academic standards. He also

wanted Providence to be accredited by the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools.

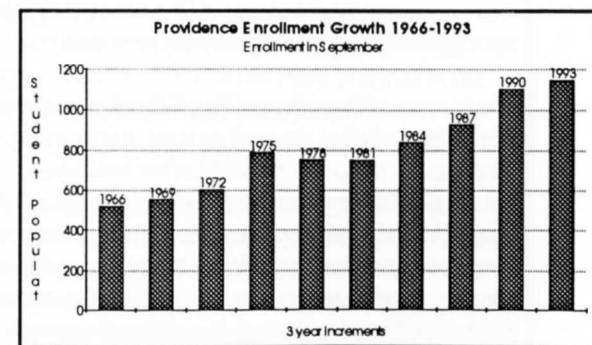
3. To improve the buildings and grounds, to upgrade, replace and improve the facilities on the beautiful thirty acre campus in New Lenox.

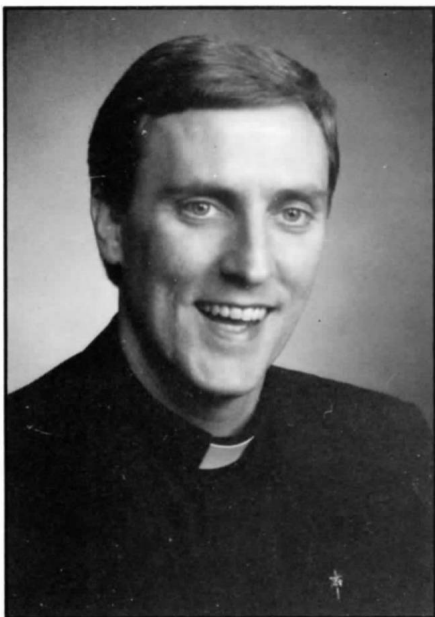
In 1985, with the approval of Bishop Imesch, the school name was changed to Providence Catholic High School.

To improve the Pastoral Program, Fr. Michael O'Connor was appointed Director. He was responsible for all things religious. Fr. McGrath appointed Tim Gawla as Assistant Principal and together they began a program which continues today to challenge and improve the curriculum. The faculty and Administration redefined the academic program, raised graduation requirements twice, developed an Honors Curriculum, a Developmental Program and a College Preparatory Program. They also developed and implemented an Academic Adjustment Program and a Peer Tutoring Program. The faculty also created for themselves a community of faith and in teams wrote a Mission Statement, developed course outlines, course descriptions, and a Curriculum Guide for every academic course. They wrote a comprehensive Five Year Plan which is reviewed yearly. Later the faculty wrote Scope and Sequencing Charts for all classes and then prepared for and were fully accredited by the North Central Association in 1991. Each year the curriculum received adjustments and changes.

Over the years significant improvements were made to the Guidance and Counseling Department and the Studies Department. An

Activities Department was started to stimulate students' involvement. A Development Department was started to recruit new students, to raise money and to publicize Providence achievements. To help students earn their tuition and to continue renovations and improvements to the building, Fr. McGrath initiated the Summer Work





Fr. John Merkelis, O.S.A., Principal (94-present.)

Program in 1984. Additional athletic teams were added and the reputation of Providence High School continued to grow. Athletically, Providence teams have been very successful, winning a total of ten State Championships since its opening in New Lenox.

In the capital improvement area, approximately \$150,000 each year was spent by the school, with the support of the parent clubs, to improve the facilities and to provide high tech equipment for students. An important addition was made in 1993 when the Computer Writing and Data Processing Lab were installed into the Christopher Cooper Computer

Center. Providence students access Internet and Illinet in order to do research, word processing and better prepare themselves for college.

Enrollment in 1985 was 926 students. By 1993, it had grown to 1,140. Administration, faculty and parents all agreed to limit enrollment so that Providence would not lose its personal atmosphere.

By 1993, it had become obvious to Fr. McGrath that the complexity of directing a modern Catholic high school required more than one person could do. With the approval of the Augustinians, Fr. McGrath was appointed the President of Providence. Fr. John Merkelis was appointed the second Augustinian Principal.

The history of Providence High School is interesting. From its beginning in Joliet, through its temporary closing during the Depression, the condemnation of the building in 1959, the new foundation in New Lenox in 1962, the crisis in 1971, the turnaround under Fr. Kaffer, the building period, the transition to the Augustinians, the expansion in academic programs and in student enrollment, the growth of its reputation, and its athletic success, all these things have contributed to that spirit which makes Providence great.

Providence people know that Providence can be very much like a family. While it is a school and must be run like a business, people at

Providence make every effort to care about and for each other.

In 1992, Providence celebrated its 30th Anniversary in New Lenox, and in 1993, its 75th Anniversary in the Diocese of Joliet. With God's blessing, Providence will celebrate for many more years.

Appendix I

Athletic Department History

In the fall of 1962 Providence High School opened its doors in New Lenox. Providence had only two athletic directors so far, Tom Dedin and Matt Senffner. Tom Dedin began the athletic program in the fall of 1962. That year, the first sports were freshman boys' soccer, basketball and baseball. The girls' program was not interscholastic. The girls were involved in G.A.A. (Girls' Athletic Association). Basically, the girls stayed after school and were involved in various intramural activities. G.A.A. was initially sponsored by Mrs. Betty Svitek.

In those days, students built bonfires for school spirit at Homecoming. Lincoln-Way students and Providence students would try to burn down each others' bonfire. Sleeping overnight on campus to protect the bonfire became very popular whether in cars, trucks or on the roof.

Over the years, the athletic program has grown. Major changes took place in 1972-73 with the addition of women's interscholastic programs. Ms. Nan Airola became the first Girls' Athletic Coordinator. Tom Dedin left Providence after the 1975-76 school year and Matt Senffner, who was the Assistant Athletic Director, became the Athletic Director the following school year. The baseball field was named the Tom Dedin Field in honor of the man who worked so hard to initiate the athletic programs at Providence.

Conference affiliation began in the late 1960's when Providence joined the South Central Prep League. In 1971, the Celtics joined the Private School League and remained in it until the 1986-87 school year. In the fall of 1987, the Celtics began a two year affiliation with the West Suburban Catholic Conference. In the fall of 1989, Providence became an independent.

In the mid-70's, the Illinois High School Association started enroll-

ment classification for state competition. Providence immediately became a power in boys' baseball, basketball, wrestling and girls' track.

In the 80's as the enrollment grew, Providence became "Providence Catholic," a "AA" school. Providence became a power in volleyball and football. It continued to be a state power in wrestling.

Over the years the athletic teams have produced twenty-four state level competition trophies in their thirty-two trips to state team competition. Providence has won ten state championships.

Listed here are Providence athletic teams and the year they began:

1962	Boys' Soccer - Tom Dedin
	Boys' Basketball - Tom Dedin
	Boys' Baseball - Tom Dedin
	Girls' Athletic Association - Betty Svitek
1964	Boys' Golf - Br. Sebastian
1965	Boys' Cross Country - Ken Raymond
1966	Boys' Track - Ken Raymond
	Boys' Football - Matt Senffner
1970	Boys' Soccer Dropped
1972	Boys' Wrestling - Pat McNemey
1973	Girls' Track - Judy Legan
	Girls' Tennis - Nan Airola
	Girls' Volleyball - Nan Airola
	Girls' Basketball - Nan Airola
1974	Boys' Tennis - Pat Sullivan
1984	Girls' Cross Country - Tim Ruettiger
1985	Girls' Golf - Tim Gawla
1992	Boys' Soccer Reinstated - Noel Catasso
	Boys' Hockey - Frank Cavallone
	Boys' Volleyball - Cindy Olczy.

State Tournament Team Finishes

1977	Wrestling	3rd Place
1978	Wrestling	State Championship (A)
	Girls' Track	State Championship (A)
	Baseball	State Championship (A)
	Basketball	3rd Place
	Volleyball	Quarterfinals
1979	Basketball	State Championship (A)
	Baseball	Semifinals
	Girls' Track	5th Place
1980	Wrestling	2nd Place
	Girls' Track	3rd Place
1981	Wrestling	State Championship (A)
	Girls' Track	2nd Place
	Basketball	Quarterfinals
1982	Baseball	State Championship (A)
	Wrestling	2nd Place
	Girls' Track	4th Place
1986	Baseball	Quarterfinals
1987	Football	State Championship (4A)
	Wrestling	3rd Place
1988	Wrestling	State Championship (AA)
	Football	Quarterfinals
	Girls' Golf	10th Place
1989	Wrestling	State Championship (AA)
	Volleyball	3rd Place
	Girls' Golf	4th Place
1990	Wrestling	2nd Place
	Girls' Golf	4th Place
1991	Football	State Championship (4A)
	Wrestling	Quarterfinals
1992	Wrestling	Quarterfinals
1993	Wrestling	3rd Place
1994	Hockey	Semifinals
	Wrestling	3rd Place
	Football	State Championship (5A)
1995	Baseball	Quarterfinals
	Football	State Championship (4A)
	Volleyball	Quarterfinals
1996	Wrestling	3rd Place

Some of Those who Contributed to the History

Mary Therese Flavin Devine	Robert Gariboldi
Marge Rock Kurpatis	Bro. Daniel McMullen, FSC
Sue Mores	Val Mores
Dorothy Nugent	Jack Nugent
John O'Reilly	Rosemary O'Reilly
Mary Beth Reiter	George Reitter
Dan Ruettiger, Sr.	Matt Senffner
Don Shepherd, Jr.	Jeanette Smriga
Pat Sullivan	Len Wedic
Sr. Mary Dionette Werner	

Appendix II

Some of the People who Helped Build the Additions at Providence:

Brown and Lambrecht	Ed Currie, iron worker
Wally Dozak	Gordon Newton
Dan Petrich, building contractor	John Prebeg
Don Reynolds	Dan Ruettiger
Mrs. Dan Ruettiger	Dell Schulte, electrical work
Ray Seeley	Norma Shepherd
Don Shepherd, Sr.	
Charles Little, built the dugouts on the baseball field and the building on the football field.	

Appendix III

Former faculty members of Providence High School who were members of the Congregation of the Sisters of Providence, St. Mary of the Woods, Indiana:

Sr. Jane Bodine	Sr. Eileen Clare Goetzen
Sr. Jeanette Hagelskamp	Sr. Dorothy Evelyn Laughlin
Sr. Rosemary Mackey	Sr. Marie Ellen Sullivan
Sr. Charles Ellen Tark	

Sources

1. Early historical material taken directly from The Path Marked Out by Sr. Mary Roger Madden, S.P., A History of the Sisters of Providence of St. Mary of the Woods, Vol. 3., pages 451 & 452.

2. Research and personal anecdotes were collected by Fr. John Merkelis, O.S.A., and Fr. Richard McGrath, O.S.A.

3. Diane Kalcic

4. Sr. Julia Shea, S.P.

June 20, 1994

— NOTES —

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