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**Villa Maria: A Neighborhood College
and Sister Jean Baptiste**

By David Frew, Scholar in Residence
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Sister Jean Baptiste DiLuzio

Sad news. Sister Jean Baptiste DiLuzio, my high school Spanish teacher, passed away recently at age 98. She was unique among the host of teachers at Cathedral Prep during the 1950s, largely because she cared so much – not only for her students but for her discipline.

Sister Jean was young and amazingly energetic. At the time, we guessed she was in her twenties, but I now realize she was a bit older. She was also beautiful; not just physically, but by virtue of her enthusiasm and energy. She would literally bounce around the classroom, speaking mostly in Spanish. Sister Jean took the time to learn the names of each of her students, no simple task given the huge class sizes caused by the popularity of her classes. And she always referred to us by our Spanish names: I was “Dabid.”

Even though I was not a gifted language student (a massive understatement), I always had the sense that she liked me, and much more importantly, that she knew me. She had an astonishing way of knowing my language translation weaknesses. After each examination she would explain exactly how I had failed myself. And she was always correct. During parent conference visits my mother would inevitably come home with good reports about my “progress,” even though my grades were less than great.

Years later, I realized how much I had learned from Sister Jean while visiting Italy with my wife Mary Ann, whose family is from Calabria. Mary Ann's parents and brother were born in Italy, and she still has dozens of relatives in a small southern Italian town, which we visited several times. As I was struggling to make myself at least "passable" in Italian, my old Spanish vocabulary came rushing back and was more than helpful. I reached out to Sister Jean between visits, realizing that she, like Mary Ann, had parents who were Italian immigrants. Once more she helped, suggesting tutorials designed for shifting from Spanish to Italian and, in particular, to the dialect spoken in Mary Ann's hometown.

Sister Jean and so many other local women were products of our neighborhood college, Villa Maria, which was located at West Eighth and Liberty streets. It is astonishing to imagine that back in those very early days Erie had two women's colleges, Villa and Mercyhurst, and both were operated by religious sisters. Villa Maria, with its ominous Gothic architecture, covered an entire large city block just a few blocks from Gridley Park, where we hung out and played baseball. Its building complex contained a grade school, a college, student dormitories, a beautiful chapel, and the convent, where most of the Sisters of St. Joseph resided. In addition to its in-town property on Liberty Street, Villa had acquired several acres of "country" property, which housed its preschool and kindergarten, Maryvale. That property later became the home for the college and Villa Maria Academy when it moved west, creating larger facilities. The previous high school building is now a community college.

As kids, we vaguely understood the importance of having an actual college in the neighborhood. There was a convenience store just steps from the corner on West Eighth Street where we shopped for supplies like popsicles and candy bars: Bensons. One of the special treats for us really cool boys was seeing Villa College girls file into the store to purchase stuff. It was almost like being a part of a neighborhood campus.

The work that the Sisters of St. Joseph accomplished in Erie continues to amaze. Their 1870 arrival in Erie from France, which coincided with the Civil War, was just in time to minister to the health care needs of a region whose soldiers and civilians had been devastated by war. Working with the sick and wounded perfectly fit their mission, "ministering to the sick and teaching children." Eventually, the growth of the local order persuaded the sisters to build a convent on the then-western outskirts of the city at today's Eighth and Liberty.

The "High Victorian Gothic" building they constructed at the center of the site in 1892 became the centerpiece of an amazing complex that eventually filled the entire city block. Connected additions, in 1904 and 1927, allowed the growing order of sisters to expand both their home convent complex and their regional work. In addition to pledging their service to the Erie Catholic Diocese by teaching in grade schools and high schools throughout the diocese, the Sisters of St Joseph

accomplished an astonishing number of their own accomplishments. Notable among them were Villa Grade School, Villa Maria Academy, and Villa College, and a beautiful chapel. In addition, the Sisters of St Joseph were responsible for establishing Maryvale Kindergarten, St. Vincent Hospital, St Joseph's Home for Children, St. Mary's Home, and St. Patrick's Haven (all in separate locations) as well as staffing Harborcreek Home for Boys.

Sister Jean Baptiste DiLuzio was a 1942 graduate of Villa Maria Academy and a 1946 graduate of Villa College. At a time when Erie was reeling from the aftershocks of World War II and trying to rebuild itself, the Sisters of St. Joseph were powering a local peacetime transition by creating a supply of badly needed teachers and nurses, by using the two biggest academic programs at Villa College. Sister Jean was a classic example of that incredible work. She grew up on Erie's east side at Holy Rosary Parish, one of four local Italian neighborhoods. She attended earned a bachelor's degree in Spanish at Villa College. Exceptional academic preparation enabled her to thrive as a graduate student at Case Western Reserve University, where she earned a master's degree in Spanish Literature. She was academically driven, but even more inspired by the example of the sister-teachers who had nurtured her, so she entered the religious life in 1944 while she was in college and took final vows with the Sisters of St. Joseph in 1949.

Sister Jean completed summer workshops in conversational Spanish as well as classic literature in Mexico and Spain (both taught in Spanish) and took advanced graduate coursework at Dayton University as well as Catholic University in Washington, D.C. She seemed destined to go on for a Ph.D. in Spanish Literature but was more committed to a high school teaching career and helping kids like me appreciate language arts. Not an easy task! She often cites the simple faith of her immigrant Italian parents as the driving force in her motivation to be of service.



*A view of the early Villa complex at West Eighth and Liberty streets prior to additions.
Note the vacant land on the north side.*



The original 1892 convent building has become a H.A.N.D.S. facility.

Her 25-year tenure at Cathedral Prep was not Sister Jean's only teaching assignment. She taught Spanish and other subjects at other grade schools and high schools throughout the diocese. She also worked in administrative roles at both the high school and collegiate levels. Then after her teaching days were finished, she continued working both for the Diocese of Erie at the Office of the Tribunal (30 years) and for the Sisters of St. Joseph.

It was my great pleasure to have continued to see and work with Sister Jean until very recently. As a consultant for Harborcreek Youth Homes, we conspired on several cases while she was serving on the Board of Directors. I worked with her again when she was at the diocesan Office of the Tribunal. Our most interesting and fun associations, however, were visits just for catching up. We shared several visits at her West 26th Street residence and dinners with Mary Ann as we laughed over old times. Sister Jean and Mary Ann had so many things in common.

While the 2023 SSJ does not have the strength of numbers that it once did, it remains a force in the community, particularly on the east side and in the old West 18th Street, Little Italy neighborhood, where they minister to an entire portfolio of needs while continuing to operate the important senior living complex that they have established on the west side of town. Erie's Sisters of St. Joseph benefited and then suffered from the demographic shifts that have impacted Catholic orders of sisters across North America. During the population boom of the post-World War II era, the number of sisters grew exponentially, reaching a peak in the late 1960s. During the 1950s, as the proportion of Catholic births exceeded national averages, churches and schools shifted toward the suburbs, and the Sisters of St. Joseph moved with the trend. Riding that wave, they established both their new

high school and expanded college on the west side, in today's Millcreek Township, as they continued in teaching service to Erie's new grades schools while they expanded into the suburbs. Like other institutions, the Sisters of St. Joseph found themselves caught in the changing mores of the late 1960s, as fewer women chose lives of service within religious orders.

The boldest westward move for the sisters was the creation of St. Mary's Senior Living Center and its adjacent residence and chapel for the sisters. It was there that Sister Jean Baptiste Diluzio served her final years with the order of sisters who had inspired and nurtured her. Amazingly, she continued to work there for the SSJ in the Development Office until 2023.

At the time of her passing, she had completed 80 years of service to her community. In speaking to Sister Jean, it was immediately apparent that the Sisters of St Joseph were and continue to be a powerful and inspirational community. As they move back into the inner city to minister to people, they continue to inspire.



The Sisters of St. Joseph Neighbor to Neighbor Ministry



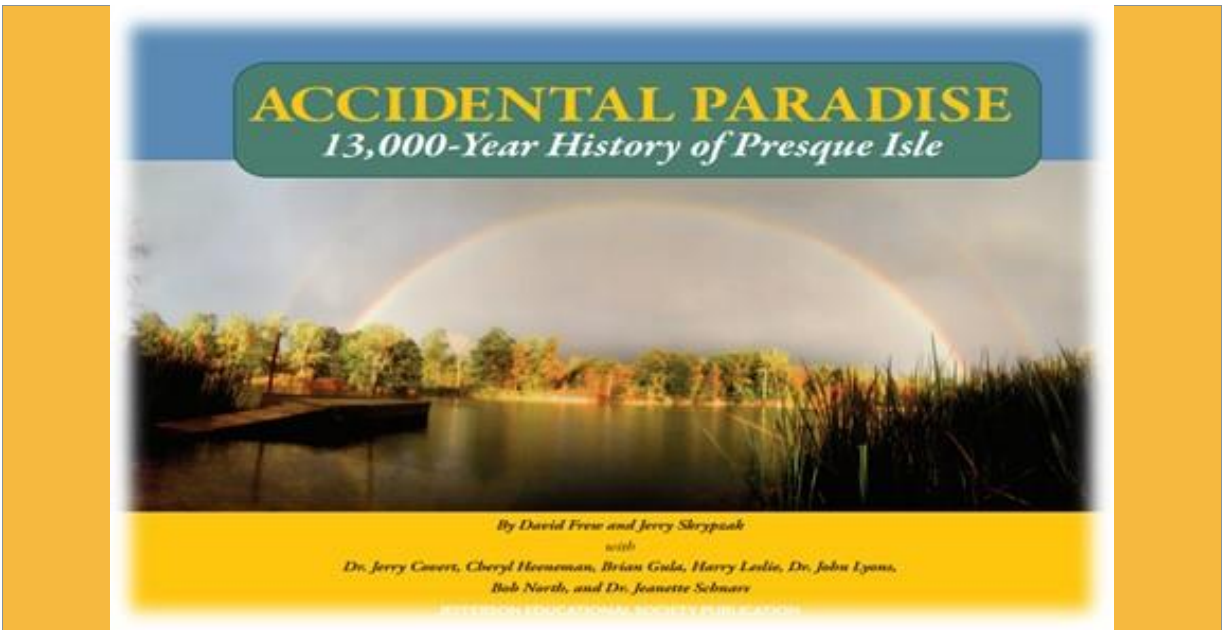
Gone from this Earth, but never forgotten, Sister Jean had a perpetual twinkle in her eye.

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Accidental Paradise
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To watch "Accidental Paradise: Stories Behind The Stories" click [here](#).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Historian and author David Frew, Ph.D., is a Scholar-in-Residence at the JES. An emeritus professor at Gannon University, he held a variety of administrative positions during a 33-year career. He is also emeritus director of the Erie County Historical Society/Hagen History Center and is president of his own management consulting business. Frew has written or co-written 35 books and more than 100 articles, cases, and papers.



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