

# Sisters of Notre Dame

## HISTORY CHALLENGES

In 17<sup>th</sup> century France, Marguerite Bourgeoys, a young woman with vision, prayed to discern God's call in her life. She asked admission to a cloistered community of Carmelite Sisters, only to be refused. A chance conversation with Monsieur de Maisonneuve, governor of New France, led Marguerite to accept his invitation to come to Ville-Marie (Montreal) in 1653 and educate the children of the First Nations people and pioneer settlers. Soon known as "Mother of the Colony", she is recognized today as co-founder of Ville-Marie. Marguerite founded Canada's first uncloistered community of women religious, the Congregation of Notre Dame, whose members go freely among the people, spreading the news of God's love in Canada, the USA, Japan, Cameroon, Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras and France. Centuries later, Marguerite became the first woman in Canada to be canonized.

The Congregation of Notre Dame was deeply involved in elementary school education in Toronto since 1932, and from 1950-76 it would provide from its French Provinces personnel for bilingual education at elementary and secondary level. Villa Marguerite Bourgeoys (renamed Ecole Secondaire de Charbonnel) was the first bilingual high school in Toronto. Still, the Congregation's biggest gift to Catholic High School education came in 1941 when the Archbishop invited the Congregation to open a high school for girls in the east end of Toronto. Opportunities for a Catholic high school education for a girl were mostly downtown and private. Variations of this sign in a store window, "Help wanted: Catholics and women need not apply", underline the urgency of the request. Sister St. Gabriel of the Angels, CND, arrived on August 15 with one other Sister, no building and no students. Sister was to work with the Catholic School Board in setting up Grades 9 and 10. By the end of Labour Day weekend, collaboration, worthy of a best-seller, resulted in the arrival of the 75 Grade 9 and 10 pioneer students of Notre Dame High School at a small building on Malvern Ave., once St. John's Church Hall. The strong family spirit instilled at its birth marks Notre Dame to this day as a close-knit, caring school community, dedicated to faith-filled Gospel living. Each one's gifts, academic and other, are called forth and supported to enable the student to become all that God calls her to be. Broad horizons challenge the compassion and creativity of the student body as the unknown neighbour in need comes into focus.

In the next 40 years, on one acre of land still holding the original 1949 and 1963 buildings provided by Archdiocesan education campaigns, this school grew to serve a student body of over 1100 just before government funding of the three senior grades was finally granted on June 12, 1984. Notre Dame's survival story is one of heroic commitment and sacrifice to make a difference for future young people, and to help right a long-standing injustice in our educational funding history. Everyone concerned resolutely stood together in a common cause. Parents and private school teachers and students engaged in major fund-raising; the Congregation, in an effort to keep tuition affordable for the ordinary family and still hire top quality lay staff, returned salaries to the school and made provision of CND personnel a priority. Almost as the announcement of full funding was being formulated, Marguerite Bourgeoys was canonized by Pope John Paul II on October 31, 1982. It was as if she reminded all of us to savour, value and never ever take for granted the treasure of Catholic education passed on to us as our rightful heritage.

On October 15, 2011, Notre Dame High School Toronto will celebrate its 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary and many of its thousands of graduates will gather to remember a unique shared experience facilitated by two ordinary women who listened for and followed God's call to do extraordinary things. Though St. Marguerite and Sister St. Gabriel are from very different times and places, both may well cause us to reflect: *"In this interdependent world of ours and with the one lifetime I am granted, how well am I discerning the needs of the present time and the contribution God calls me to offer through my giftedness and opportunities?"*

