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School Construction

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St. Patrick Catholic High school North Harrison County, Mississippi

By Jennifer Walker-Journey

There's not much history in the Mississippi town of Tradition. Houses here are just beginning to rise up like rows of cotton waiting for harvest. And plots have now been cleared for the Gulf Coast campus of William Carey University and the Tradition Town Center.

One of the first completed establishments in Tradition was St. Patrick Catholic High School, which opened its doors to nearly 600 students last fall. And, if there's one thing that St. Patrick brings to the state's largest master planned community, it's history.

St. Patrick's past is rooted in two other schools – St. John's High School in Gulfport and Mercy Cross High School in Biloxi. Both schools had enjoyed a history of more than 50 years serving the diocese, but enrollment at both schools was beginning to fluctuate. The old buildings were showing signs of wear, "and we were constantly doing patchwork on them," said Bobby Trosclair, principal of Mercy Cross and a former student of the school.

It wasn't long before the diocese conducted a study and determined that the two schools should merge into one new school. In 2004, Guild Hardy Architects began researching and working on the plans for a new facility. Its design team consisted of Taylor Guild, AIA-Principal-In-Charge; Stephen Stojcich, AIA-Project Architect; Shawna Henry, AIA – Production; Jennifer Seymour – Production; and Lee Palermo – Construction Administration.

Just one year later, in August 2005, Hurricane Katrina threw her wrath on the Gulf Coast. Among the vast devastation, both St. John's and Mercy Cross suffered severe damage and flooding. It took two weeks for classes to resume at St. John's, and 19 days for Mercy Cross to reopen.

Suddenly, the school project became a priority, Stojcich said.

Around the same time, developer and philanthropist Joseph C. Canizaro began sizing up property in northern Harrison County for a New Urbanist neighborhood. Canizaro's dream was to build a master planned community reminiscent of the towns and villages along the Gulf Coast in the early 20th century. This community would be built to include all the necessities of everyday life –shopping, recreation, entertainment, education – all within walking distance of each home in the village.

The Town of Tradition was little more than a vision when Canizaro got word that the diocese was going to build a new school. He offered to donate 40 acres at the site for the facility. The current school buildings were each a 15-minute drive to the proposed school property, into an area that was, for all practical purposes, out in the middle of nowhere.

The proposed property was also farther from the coast and at a much higher elevation, which would keep the building at a safer distance from future hurricanes. Plus, there was something exciting about being a part of the birth of a new community. The diocese took the offer, and plans began moving forward.

In July 2006, construction began on a traditionally designed, 96,000-square-foot junior high and high school campus. The plan, designed in a cloister effect, included a two-story academic building, gymnasium, cafeteria, and band hall. At the center was the chapel, "which signifies both the spiritual and physical center of the school," Stojcich said.

Named the principal of the new campus, former Mercy Cross principal Trosclair was on the site regularly watching the progress. It wasn't until during construction that a name was given to the school – St. Patrick, in honor of the large Irish influence in the diocese.

Upon learning the name, the building committee did research and found a marble St. Patrick statue online. The statute was placed in front of the chapel, and landscape architect Pat Drackett with Groundscape, Inc., surrounded it with shamrocks.

In spring, the shamrocks blossom and provide brilliant strokes of light in the courtyard. The area also is flanked by tiered seating, offering a pleasant place for outdoor classes.

It took a year for the school to be completed, and on Saturday, August 11, 2007, the school was dedicated. Classes started two days later. Nearly 600 students were enrolled, retaining 85 to 90 percent of the original student bodies.

"It's wonderful, fantastic and difficult all at the same time," Trosclair said of relocating to the new building in a new town.

The merging of the two schools offered challenges, but those worked out quickly once students, parents, and faculty saw where Trosclair's heart was. He saw the move as an opportunity to start fresh and begin focusing on the future.

"Everything is new; everything we do is new. We're setting a tradition for everything that will follow," he said. The new tradition, Trosclair noted, is added respect.

In the old building, if a student accidentally broke a window or marked on the walls, the attitude was that it didn't matter, he said. But now it does.

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"Here, the students take more pride in their school," he said.

One upgrade that Trosclair has enjoyed is the new bell system. He can program different songs to ring at different times of the day. Various classical songs mark the changing of classes—Beethoven's Fifth Symphony signifies the tardy bell, and rap song "Who Let the Dogs Out" means school is dismissed for the day.

St. Patrick recently completed its first year in the new building. During that time, those at St. Patrick watched the small town take shape as houses multiplied and ground was broken for new projects. Soon, Biloxi Regional Medical Center will begin construction on a Family Care Clinic, and a fitness center and café will also take root.

"There's not that much here now," Trosclair said. "But, 10 years from now, this place will be filled. It will be exciting."

Guild Hardy Architects, www.gharchitects.net, has offices in Biloxi and Jackson, Mississippi. Founded in 1953, Guild Hardy Architects has become one of the largest and most respected architecture firms in Mississippi.

Fast Facts

School: St. Patrick Catholic High School

Location: North Harrison County, Mississippi

Student Body: 600 students

Grades Served 7 - 12

Project Goal: Merge two existing schools

Size: 96,000 square feet

Cost: \$21 million

Challenge: Plans to merge schools into one new campus had to be accelerated after Hurricane Katrina.

Solution: Land was donated in a remote location that would soon become Mississippi's largest master planned community.

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