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Grand dame of the art world

Sister Mary Ignatius continues her work of creating, teaching

By Lorraine McClellan
staff writer

With spirit and enthusiasm, a brisk walk and a quick wit that belie her 77 years, Sister Mary Ignatius continues her life's work as a teacher, luring artists of all ages to her part-studio, part-greenhouse, part-art gallery in Mercy Center complex.

Her home away from home is a highly stimulating room, filled with pieces of crystal, brass, shells, plants, paintings and sculpture, where she piles her art of "pushing my students to their highest potential, pushing them to creativity."

Her running commentary while teaching a class is likewise stimulating. In what could certainly not have been more than 10 minutes she had whisked calligraphic letters on and off a blackboard, shown her students exam-

ples of cover designs to use on greeting cards, read a poem, explained the manufacture of a drawing pen to illustrate why one pen was better than another and tossed in a bit of philosophy along the way by saying "Always keep your mistakes. They are good for your humility."

The nun, who spent 54 years as a school teacher and 30 of those years heading the art department at Mercy High School, left that post five years ago known as "the living symbol of Mercy High."

Today some of her students refer to her as "the Grand Dame of the art world."

"I didn't retire," Sister Ignatius says. "I just moved on. God will retire me when he's ready."

MEANWHILE she jokes that she

graduated from the hardwood floors in the school room to the carpeted floor in her new quarters where both morning and evenings are filled with art students.

It is the carpeted floor, however, that prevents her from teaching sculpture, which is the only kind of art class she doesn't offer now.

Her four-year art course at Mercy High covered the basics in every possible medium using a wide variety of subject matter, and she says her philosophy of teaching then holds true today.

"No artsy-craftsy stuff," she says. "A beginning student learns from the onset that I don't teach oil painting, or watercolor painting. I teach painting. If you can't draw you can't paint and every one who comes here starts out with the lead pencil. It's the only way I can tell where the (new) student is at and then we go from there."

Her goal, she says, is to see her students "go as far as they can go, and sometimes that might only be enjoyment, but if that is the full potential then we will achieve that. I'm a firm believer in basics. If you can master foundation, you can take on any craft. Only then can you strive for creativity."

She calls herself a hard task-master. "They are only here for two hours, but I really work them during that time. And sometimes I don't know where they come from because I've never advertised my classes, not once," she said.

STUDENTS 17-70 come to learn from Sister Mary Ignatius maybe because of the love of her work that exudes from her every word; maybe because of her philosophy; maybe because of her wood carvings or mosaics that are in hospitals, churches, convents and schools; maybe because of the literally hundreds of students who left Mercy High to make names for themselves in the art world, maybe because she built what came to be known as the metro area's "award-winning high-school art department."

A good portion of her time at Mercy



Sister Mary Ignatius clips the desk with her hand to emphasize a point to students in her colorful studio-classroom, where she continues her career of teaching which began in 1922.

High's art department chairman was spent getting her students' work shown and known, with exhibits both in and out of school and in every context that came along, outlets not available to her present students.

If she has a frustration today, she says it is because she has so many adult students doing superior work with minimal exhibit space along a corridor in Mercy Center and no market for their creations, which is something she is going to have to "seriously think about for next year."

Her September to June classes wound up last week. And sticking to her I-will-never-retire stance, she has a full schedule of commissions to fill and gifts to be made on her summer agenda.

COMMISSIONS FOR paintings or sculptures or mosaics or calligraphy are a constant for Sister Mary Ignatius who fills these orders in her studio during the afternoons in the school year when classes are not in session, and full time during the summer.

This year she will add to that workload by brightening up McAuley Center for our elderly and sick with some paintings and mosaics.

She referred to the newly construct-

ed and most recently dedicated retirement home and infirmary that is now occupied by 20 sisters who moved into the Sisters of Mercy's Province headquarters on 11 Mile and Middlebelt in May.

Her gift is a typical gesture for the woman whose roots go back to the time Mercy High School was on Mercy College campus on Outer Drive in Detroit. To help raise funds to build the new school her "out-of-the-classroom time" was spent creating religious Christmas cards. "Because there was a strong need for religious cards that year," her efforts eventually evolved into a full-fledged greeting card year-around fund-raiser.

Her gift to those in McAuley Center won't be a small one. The very petite and sweet Sister Mary Ignatius has executed the eight Stations in mosaic, each 2 feet high by 4 feet wide. A recent gift to a hospital, operated by members of her order in Muskegon is now in its lobby 12 feet long and 7 feet high.



An over-present smile and expressive use of her hands are the trademarks of Sister Mary Ignatius which tell better than her words how much she enjoys teaching, creating and talking about art and her art students.



Staff photos by Randy Borst



Art students from throughout the metro's northwest suburbs of all ages come to learn from Sister Mary Ignatius, who has made a name for herself and her art department at Mercy High School.