

Slain schools chief had area ties

By PAT MURPHY
STAFF WRITER

A former colleague at the West Bloomfield School District members Joseph Piasecki as a dedicated educator, so dedicated he seemed to almost be on a mission.

"He felt he could make a contribution as a leader," said West Bloomfield Superintendent Seymour Gretchko. His tenure overlapped with Piasecki's years with West Bloomfield schools, where Piasecki was assistant principal at the high school and later a project manager and public relations specialist.

The priest who in 1980 recruited Piasecki from West Bloomfield to St. Mary's Preparatory School in Orchard Lake Village remembers him as a firm — but fair — disciplinarian who cared about students.

"He was jovial when the occasion demanded," said Monsignor Stanley Milewski, chancellor of St. Mary's. But usually he was stern and serious, Milewski said.

Gretchko and Milewski were among the hundreds of area residents who last week mourned the death of Piasecki, a popular educator who was killed Thursday in Chelsea, west of Ann Arbor, where he was the superintendent of schools.

Piasecki, 47, was one of three people shot following a hearing involving a chemistry teacher, Stephen Leith, 39, who was arraigned in the killing Friday. Surviving the shooting were English teacher Phil Jones, 44, and principal Ronald Mead, 43, both of whom were wounded.

Piasecki, a native of Hamtramck, graduated from Central Michigan and Wayne State universities and taught in Pontiac and Rochester before joining the West Bloomfield schools in 1977.

"He was a very dedicated educator," said Gretchko, who knew Piasecki as a member of the West Bloomfield staff and as principal of St. Mary's. "We worked on a number of projects together and I got to know him pretty well. He will be missed."

Piasecki's death underscores the need to teach and promote nonviolent methods of resolving conflict, Gretchko said.

Milewski described Piasecki as "perhaps the most disciplined and professional educator I've ever met."

He was so qualified, the priest said, that St. Mary's broke with its own tradition when its principal's job became vacant and the school actively began recruiting Piasecki.

"When the job (St. Mary's principal) became open, there was no doubt who we wanted," recalled Milewski. "There was no better choice than Joe Piasecki."

But Piasecki was a tough negotiator, recalled Milewski. "He insisted we match the salary (and fringes) he was getting in West Bloomfield, and he was open about the fact he would only stay a short time."

The school — which at the time boarded about 230 students — had never paid salaries approaching those in the public schools, Milewski said. "But we did for Joe Piasecki."

And the extra money was worth every cent, the priest acknowledged. "He was admired, respected and appreciated by the students, the faculty and parents."

"He went to every athletic event, every extracurricular activity and every fund-raiser."

As the two got to know each other, the priest said he realized that Piasecki "had the most beautiful plan laid out for his life." His career path called for him to take charge of progressively larger school districts until he was superintendent of a district in a large metropolitan area, Milewski said. "One day he wanted to be the state superintendent of schools."

Milewski said he kept in touch with Piasecki after 1984, when Pi-

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asecki left St. Mary's to join the Breckenridge district.

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Joe Whalen, now director of admissions at St. Mary's, was a student in the early 1980s when Piasecki was principal.

"He was one of the biggest influences on my life," he said. "He was a great figure of authority, the very top."

"If you ever went to see him, you were in big trouble," recalled Whalen.

Whalen said he had his share of minor disciplinary problems as a student. But they were always minor, he said, in part because of the spirit of discipline inspired by Piasecki.



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Worked in WB: Joseph Piasecki, the slain Chelsea schools superintendent, is shown in a 1977 picture, when he was assistant principal at West Bloomfield High School.

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