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Bridging the gap: Yoshiko Gingerich was one of the first folks to cross the newly-opened pedestrian bridge.

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It's more common than you think

Harrison bridge opens to ease traffic woes

By TIM SMITH
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Just moments after Harrison High School Principal Rando Horn cut a strip of green ribbon, signifying the official opening of the long-awaited canopied bridge entrance, he excitedly waved a faculty member over from the parking lot.

"It's okay," Horn said to bilingual education teacher Yoshiko Gingerich Friday morning. "The bridge is officially open now."

With an almost embarrassed grin, Gingerich eagerly took Horn up on his offer to use the brand new entrance - rather than navigate through some of the temporary entry points that have made 2000-01 a logistical headache for everybody at the Farmington district school.

"Beautiful," Gingerich said. "We were waiting all year for this bridge to be completed. It's much easier to get into the

school and it looks beautiful."

Horn said the first big test will come on Monday, Feb. 26, the first day after winter break.

"They still have to paint and there are a couple things on the front part of the building that they (construction crews) need to do," Horn said on the day of the unveiling. "But the bridge is usable, and safe."

To augment student safety, the bridge is well-lit at night and an electronic heat sensor kicks in whenever the temperature drops, to melt any ice and snow from the walkway and steps.

The principal said having the facility open is important to keeping pedestrian traffic, cars and buses from piling up at lower level entrances. Vehicles can also drive under the bridge, enhancing overall traffic flow.

"Here is a great place for parents to drop the kids off or pick them up," said Horn, looking out toward the bridge on the west side of the school.

Switching gears

Another benefit for school administrators, who want the bridge to be a primary exit at the end of the day, is they will be able to hopefully discourage students from loitering outside the building after school.

"It's going to be easier to keep an eye on kids hanging out after school," Horn said.

The steel, barrel-roof canopy attached to the walkway was part of the original list of bond issue construction projects.

The canopy was to have been up and ready in time for the current school year. But when work began last summer, it was discovered that the steel undergirding was too deteriorated.

Construction crews then had to switch gears and completely rebuild the bridge itself, which was further postponed until fabricated steel could be delivered to the high school. Heavy snow and below-freezing temperatures in December and January ac-

bated work conditions, explained Jerry Welch, construction manager at the site for McSEV.

With completion of the steel-and-concrete bridge, which is approximately 20-feet wide by 70-feet long, major work at the high school is virtually completed. Just about all that still needs to be done are some odds and ends and exterior painting.

Welcoming banners and benches will probably grace the bridge, Horn said.

Welch and district architect Ronald Aten accompanied Horn for the official opening of the bridge, which cost approximately \$300,000 to complete with the money taken from the school district's general and capital improvements funds.

The canopy portion was a separate expense, Aten said.

"I knew it would get done," Welch said. "It's been a tough pill for everyone to swallow, a tough undertaking that not everyone anticipated."

March from page A1

In an account the sisters wrote 35 years ago, they related their discussion with their driver, who was black:

"...as we drove through Lownes County, he mentioned this was dangerous sniper territory, and no one was permitted to vote in this county. As we approached the city, he explained the exact areas on the 'bridge' where a week before, the State Troopers and police had massacred his people. As we drove down Main Street, he pointed out that one block down to the right was the Negro restaurant where Rev.

James Reeb had eaten and been clubbed to death March 9, 1965."

The sisters stayed at Good Samaritan Hospital, a building left vacant with the construction of a new hospital. They slept on mattresses, with only the blankets they brought along for warmth. More than 40 nuns shared one bathroom, which had no hot water.

Though the accommodations were spartan, the food was good, as was the coffee. The sisters never learned who paid the bill to feed and house the hundreds of marchers, but often wondered

about it, Sr. Charlene added.

"People were flocking from all over," she said. "It was something miraculous. I don't even know how word got around."

Everyone gathered for an ecumenical Mass every morning, marching to church even though they'd been warned that walking too closely together down the street might be construed as a demonstration, without a parade permit. The sisters were told never to go out without a man along for protection and not to carry a nail file, because that could be considered a weapon.

Their Monday morning demonstration was something of a disappointment for the 300-400 people who participated, because no one was arrested. Sr. Charlene said she'd hoped to find out what it felt like since she had visited the Kent County Jail in Grand Rapids every Sunday for about two years.

"The streets in the black area were not paved," Sr. Charlene recalled. "They were muddy and looked dispirited. The streetlights were just little bulbs. A policeman's flashlight would have been better."

Instead, the marchers moved from City Hall to Brown's Chapel, where a memorial service was being held for Rev. Reeb. Cameras and microphones from national and international news organizations were in place. They heard Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Dr. Ralph Abernathy speak, along with a rabbi from Canada and a Bishop-elect from Minnesota.

"Each delivered a very edifying and inspirational message and left your heart crying internally for all the persons who are being so unjustly treated in our fair democracy," the sisters wrote in their memoir.

At the close of Dr. King's message, he announced a federal judge had granted permission for a march, three abreast, to the Courthouse, to leave a wreath in memory of Rev. Reeb.

Sr. Aloysius marched in the fourth row; Sr. Charlene, in the fifth, between two black Methodist bishops from Georgia and Alabama.

The group had been told not to respond to hecklers, and Sr. Charlene recalled having plenty of experience with them. She and her comrades were called "nigger lovers" and cursed at, but proceeded "meek like Christ," she said.

But nothing could have prepared them for the big march on Sunday.

The sisters met Dr. King when they gathered at Brown's Chapel, then marched behind him and Rev. Abernathy, in a crowd of more than 4,000 people walking six abreast. The women were kept on the inside for protection, Sr. Charlene said.

The mile long line of marchers traveled through Selma and down U.S. Highway 80 toward Montgomery, with helicopters and small aircraft overhead. Despite warnings to stay home, Alabamans jammed the traffic lanes that weren't being used for the march.

Signs bore slogans like "Rent your priest suit here" and "Communists and Nigger Lovers, Go Back Home." White spectators along the route mocked the marchers with jeers and epithets.

Because the sisters were to fly back to Detroit on Monday, they were taken back to Selma Sunday night, riding back over the route they had just walked. As they left Alabama, a new crop of recruits were arriving, ready to ride down that long and dangerous highway to join the march.

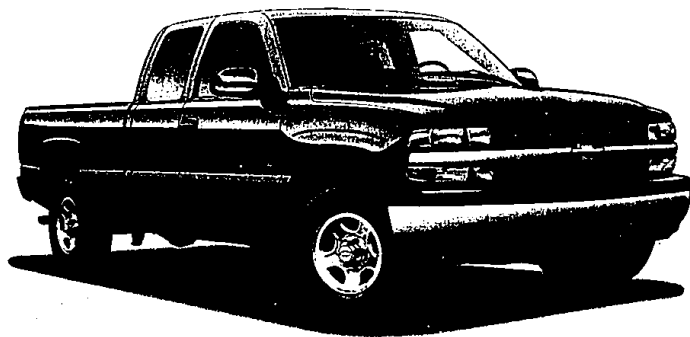
After their unexpected adventure, Sr. Charlene and Aloysius sat down and wrote a 28-page account filled with vivid details and reflections.

More than 30 years later, Sr. Charlene speaks about her week in the civil rights movement with a certain amount of awe at what was accomplished, but with the humility of a servant simply doing God's work in the world.

"We were just nobodies, going down to help," she said.

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