

# Sisters share fond memories at SVSFC reunion

BY JONI HUDDLE  
STAFF WRITER

## "529 MacDougal"

The Lopez sisters say it almost in unison, they remember the address so well. Back then, it was the St. Vincent Orphans Asylum, a fairly intimidating name for a place that was home to so many children.

"It was written into stone," Elisa Lopez Morgan recalled as she and her sisters chatted at Sunday afternoon's St. Vincent and Sarah Fisher Center alumni reunion. The three were seated with the Aquilina sisters, Jessie and Theresa, who were at St. Vincent's during the same time.

Don't think of them as "poor orphans." Think of them as successful women looking back on a good life, including the years they spent at St. Vincent's. Talk to them a while, you might even think those were some of their best years.

"Our parents were in the TB asylum," Estela Lopez Leal explained. "Our father died there."

When their mother was finally well enough to leave the hospital, she still wasn't capable of taking care of her children. She stayed with Estela's husband's family.

Elisa entered the TB sanitarium when she was two-and-a-half years old; she was there four years.

"They had a pediatric ward... kids stayed there like patients in the hospital," she said. "You didn't get out until you had three negative (sputum) tests."

Jessie remembers being in the hospital a long time with bouts of pneumonia. Hospitals were different in those days, she said.

"When you went into the hospital, you didn't get out."

Neither the asylum nor the hospital offered any kind of education. Schooling was offered through the orphanage, and the girls had the opportunity to go to outside schools as well.

St. Vincent's Mother Superior, Sister Josephine, and the other nuns were as much like parents as much like parents as it's possible to be with so many children, the sisters agreed.

"People felt sorry for us when we got out of the home. I think it was wonderful. They gave us



Gathered at St. Vincent Sarah Fisher Center's reunion Sunday are sisters Jessie Aquilina (left), with her granddaughter Jessica, Theresa Aquilina Bauer, Estela Lopez Leal, Anne Marie Lopez Sterling and Elisa Lopez Morgan, R.N.

the love they could," said Jessie.

Sister Josephine, however, went the extra mile. She called the Lopez sisters together to break the news to them about their father's death. And one particular experience sticks in Jessie's memory.

It was report card time, and she'd gotten a bad grade.

"I had to stand in line to have Sister look at my report card and sign it. I said to her, 'If you don't look at my report card and just sign it, I promise I'll do better next time,'" Jessie said. "And you know what? She did."

The girls attended Our Lady of Sorrows Catholic school, which had the unique attraction of radiated heat from the floors.

"It was just opening up," Estela said.

Sister Josephine also asked donors for funds so her girls could attend Shrine of the Little Flower secondary school.

## GREATER LESSONS

But the girls weren't only schooled in reading and writing. Their education included training in elocution, ballet classes, lessons in chorus and band, and they staged an operetta every year. There were field trips as well, to popular plays and musicals. The girls spent their summers at a beautiful campsite near Brighton.

"From the last day of school to the first day of school in the fall, we were out there," Jessie said.

"We went swimming and horseback riding," said Anne Marie Lopez Sterling. "We were very active kids."

Active, and faithful, thanks to the nuns who staffed the home.

"They provided us with a good foundation for life. A good Christian foundation," Jessie said.

The sisters agree their faith in God started with their parents, but continued and was strengthened during their time at St. Vincent's.

There were other lessons as well, the kinds of things parents used to teach kids before there were classes and varying theories and philosophies about discipline. The girls all had chores to do, like ironing and laundry when the school day was over.

"Don't you find yourself sitting up straight?" Jessie asked, and the others nodded in agreement. "We couldn't slouch."

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ed construction on the 80-acre property, named the Sarah Fisher Childrens Home.

During Sunday's alumni gathering, the sisters witnessed the opening of a cornerstone laid on

July 9, 1929. It included newspaper clippings, portraits of the Fishers and their children and a few coins dated that year, as well as letters explaining the history of the project.

For the Lopez and Aquilina sisters, the day's memories were captured in conversation and laughter and reflections on the surprisingly happy upbringing of five little girls for whom unfortunate circumstances did not mean an unfortunate life.

Yes, they were farmed out to wealthy families for the holidays, showered with gifts and taught how to behave like refined young ladies. And yes, they bathed in groups wearing long muslin robes, out of a sense of modesty mandated by the Sisters.

But they speak of Sister Josephine with a mixture of

love, appreciation and the child-like awe reserved for parents.

"She was one of the wisest," said Theresa Aquilina Bauer. "She was well-educated and very much ahead of her time."

"She had a sense of humor," Elisa Lopez Morgan added, "and foolish woman she was, she trusted us."

The Lopez and Aquilina sisters may not be related by birth, but like many of the children who lived at St. Vincent's and later at St. Vincent and Sarah Fisher Center, they still stay in touch. None of them think of themselves as having been taught or the slightest bit poorer for their childhood experiences.

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## Benefactors' letter reveals history

Sealed in the cornerstone at St. Vincent and Sarah Fisher Center for the past 73 years has been the true story of how the center came to be, in its benefactors' own words.

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