Sr. Sylvia Leonardi’s desk was a little taller when she returned to her alma mater as she began teaching in 2010 as she began teaching 4K-5 religion, meditation, library and learning resource at St. Joseph Catholic Academy.

BY KAREN MAHONEY

The 1964 graduate of St. Joseph High School continued her education at Alverno College, earning a Bachelor’s in Education. She went on to study at Cardinal Stritch, UW-Parkside and Carthage College.

Sr. Sylvia Leonardi, who also serves as the Campus Minister for the Lower Campus students, credits the faith-filled education by the School Sisters of St. Francis who founded St. Joseph High School in 1957 for helping her realize her vocation.

“I was impressed by the newly-constructed school, the atmosphere of friendship of several students and the many activities over and above our classes. This impression was fostered by the kindness, energy and involvement and dedication of the School Sisters of Saint Francis, approximately 30 of them at the time, who worked with the students, enjoyed social events and presented an enriching and challenging curriculum,” she said. “I knew I wished to enter the educational field, and noting the excellence of the sisters around St. Joseph, was an invitation to come and see what the SSSF were all about. Recognizing the dynamism and leadership, I was convinced to join this community and how thus far committed myself to 52 years of service to students, their families and our community members.”

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After committing herself to the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience at St. Joseph Convent in Milwaukee, she began teaching in Milwaukee, eventually returning to Kenosha to teach at St. Mark School.

"I celebrated my final profession of vows in my home parish of Our Lady of the Holy Rosary and since then, have celebrated my jubilees at St. Mark Parish and St. Joseph Catholic Academy, as well," she said.

Throughout her teaching career, Leonard taught language arts for grades 1-3 at St. Mark School, before coming to the Kenosha area to teach various grades in religion, reading, language arts and art.

"I resumed teaching third grade for several years, was a master teacher and mentor, and now challenge myself to teach the gift of meditation to students in our three-year-old kindergarten through fifth grade," she said. "It is a joy to share an understanding of our loving God with each age level, and to help these students mature in their relationship with Jesus, who loves them immensely.

Sunday scriptural readings, lives of the saints, and many other resources have been most helpful in planning a wonderful classroom experience for each of these age groups and their classmates, as well as planning and celebrating the Eucharist weekly as a school family. Serving as campus minister, co-advisor of our Student Council, as well as leader in our resource center is most interesting."

In Leonard’s more than 50 years in Catholic education, many changes occurred, such as the history of our daily lives and how we view our God given gifts. She explained that the educational practices have also changed and improved in response to the needs of the students.

"Why? Because students deserve it," she said. "While classroom environments change, hopefully the care and compassion expressed through teaching years ago, continues yet today. Technology, and other media has had a major impact on our teaching strategies and SJCA teachers utilize this as we prepare our students for an outstanding future and a readiness to assume a

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leadership role in whatever community they may live. Academic excellence is crucial today, as it was 60 years ago. Today we prepare students for future and successful endeavors, caring for the needs of others, and continuing to grow in their love of God.”

Some of Leonardi’s fondest teaching memories include preparing students to receive the sacraments and coming to know God.

“Noting the parents, who were former students of St. Mark or St. Joseph High School, register their young children and become involved in an exciting educational process for their family is fascinating and exciting. ‘I remember when…’ often is shared with smiles and a bit of teasing as well by these young parents,” she said. “I truly appreciate their trust and confidence in St. Joseph Catholic Academy and know their young students will receive a great education.”

It is important for Leonardi that students know they are loved and challenged to do their best in their educational growth.

“Academic excellence is crucial today, as it was 60 years ago. Today we prepare students for future and successful endeavors, caring for the needs of others, and continuing to grow in their love of God.”

“That’s what I strive to accomplish today, whether in the classroom, on the playground, in church, or meeting them in the grocery store,” she explained. “We are one family at SJCA, and encourage one another to be scholars, leaders and stewards transforming the world, wherever we may be—adults and students, alike.”

As Leonardi followed in the footsteps of the sisters that influenced her at St. Joseph’s, one young woman followed Leonardi’s example by joining the consecrated life.

“She chose to join my religious community and now serves as an educator and administrative leader in a Milwaukee high school,” she said. “I am most proud of all my students in whatever ministry they have chosen and wish blessings on them and all future St. Joseph graduates and their families.”