

AN INTERVIEW WITH
SISTER DIANE BARDOL
PRINCIPAL OF ST. MARY'S CATHOLIC SCHOOL

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By Donna Hammel
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My name is Donna Hammel. I am interviewing Sister Diane Bardol, the principal of St. Mary's Catholic School in Kodiak, Alaska. Today is April 9, 1996.

DH: Sister Diane, could you give me a little personal background such as where you were born and where you were before coming to Kodiak?

SDB: I sure could. I'll tell you where I was born. I won't tell you when. (Laugh)

DH: Okay.

SDB: I was born in Buffalo, New York. And I entered the Grey Nuns of the Sacred Heart, the Mother House being in a town outside of Philadelphia. After I finished the novitiate I began teaching in New York - Long Island, New York. From there I went to Philadelphia. And from Philadelphia I went to Atlanta. And from Atlanta I went back to Philadelphia, but to a different school. From Philadelphia I went to a small coal mining town in eastern Pennsylvania called Mahanoy City. And after that I came up here in 1970.

DH: So except for the one place, pretty much big cities before you came to Kodiak.

When did you come to Kodiak, and what were the circumstances that caused you to come?

SDB: I came to Kodiak in 1970. Kodiak, as Lima, Peru, are two distant missions, and were always volunteer places. And I always volunteered. I'm a volunteer by nature. I

volunteered for as many years as I could. I volunteered in 1970 also. But oddly enough I forgot to mail my volunteer paper in. And wouldn't you know, that was the year I got a phone call from the Mother House asking me if I would mind going to Kodiak. So I said, "Certainly not, I volunteered." Our Superior General said, "Well, I don't have your paper." And I said, "Oh! I forgot to mail it in! That's why you don't have it." So because I hadn't mailed it in she said she would have to wait a certain period of time and give me that opportunity to rethink, and she would call me back. So she did and I said, "Oh, of course I want to go to Kodiak." So that's how I got here and when I got here.

DH: So you did volunteer to come?

SDB: Yes, I did.

DH: Can you give me any background on the Grey Nuns of the Sacred Heart? For instance, I had heard that when they originally came to Kodiak, it was a nursing duty. But when you came it was totally for teaching, is that correct?

SDB: Not exactly. Our Sisters came in 1944. And of course it wasn't a state yet. It wasn't even a town. It was just a little fishing village and a military base. And it took them a long time to get here from Philadelphia because war time traffic was very difficult. And, when they came their duty was to take over the hospital. And they did. From 1944 until 1954 we only had Sisters doing hospital work here.

But actually, Sister Hillary, who was the business administrator of the hospital, also worked with Frosty Johnson to establish the public library in town. She also

helped Ben Kraft get his business going in downtown Kodiak. So, our real mission really was the hospital, and our real work was the hospital. But the Sisters, being curious people, go out and do other things, in addition to that.

Then 10 years later, 1954, Sister Hillary along with the pastor started a school. It began with three grades; first, second, and third. And Sister Hillary had the first and second grades and Father Talbot had the third grade. And each year they added one more class. Eventually Father Talbot just dropped out of the picture and the Sisters came up to continue taking over the school. And at that point it was downtown. All over the place downtown. And it remained there until 1968 when it moved up to its present location.

DH: So the nuns, the Grey Nuns of the Sacred Heart, you said they came here in 1944. Was the church already here, or did they...

SDB: No, the church wasn't here.

DH: Was there any Catholic church here at that time?

SDB: No, there were chaplains from the military branches that served here. But the priests would fly in. Apparently, from my best recollection, a priest would fly in from Anchorage periodically. But when the sisters came, that was the time that the parish then was established.

DH: Okay, so they really helped to establish the parish more than a priest coming in and establishing it.

SDB: Yes, it probably happened simultaneously. The need, plus the Sisters. But the Sisters' arrival I think created the need for the parish.

DH: When you first came to Kodiak, what were some of your first impressions when you got off the, uh, airplane?

SDB: Yes. Well, I came from Philadelphia in August. Actually it was August 25, 1970. And if you know Philadelphia, it's hot, muggy. It's very uncomfortable at that point, at that time in Philadelphia. So I flew into Kodiak and there was a contingency there to meet me. As I flew in with two other sisters. They were all exclaiming, "You have such a wonderful day to arrive in Kodiak!" The sun was shining. So I'm thinking, "Well, I just left Philadelphia and it was hot and sticky and the sun was shining." I really did not get the full impact of their statement until the next day, when it started to rain and it continued to rain for about three weeks. Well, then I began to realize why everyone said, "Wow! What a great day you have for flying in."

But my recollection, or my very vivid remembrance of coming to Kodiak, was that it was like walking through the National Geographic magazine. It was an awesome experience, and one that I just never could outgrow. I would walk out of the house every day and come over to school and walk through the woods and look at the mountains across the road and go for just a very short drive or a walk and you'd see the water and it was just as if I were living in a place that was strictly National Geographic material. Awesome.

DH: Now, where we are now, at St. Mary's School, when you came in 1970, the church and school were here. Correct?

SDB: Yes, but not our present church. Our present church was just built in 1990, I believe.

DH: Okay, but St. Mary's Church and School were right where they are now.

SDB: Yes.

DH: And what else was around here then? Was there a lot of homes?

SDB: Oh no. The land behind us belonged to the Archdiocese and so that was all woods. In fact we used to go out there and pick blueberries in the spring and then get bear bread off the fallen trees in the fall and in the winter. It was just an utterly wonderful place to walk. There were trails in the woods. So it was definitely not city at all. It was barely town.

DH: Why do you think they put the church and school out here? Moved it from downtown? Do you have any idea?

SDB: Yes. It moved from downtown out here after the tidal wave. Urban renewal said that we had to move because they had to redo downtown. And so we moved from its original location up Mill Bay Road, because it was obvious that eventually the population would move out in this direction. Because, well, there was really no other place for it to go. So we moved up on Mill Bay. Actually they were originally thinking of having the church where

Spenard's is presently. That was church property. They decided, I don't know why, but anyway they moved up the road just a little farther to where we are now.

DH: Sister, what are some of the biggest changes in Kodiak in the 26 years that you've been here?

SDB: Well, one of the biggest changes, one of the earlier ones I guess, would be the post office moving, or getting a new building. Originally it was downtown in the Donnelly building, where KANA is now. And you just went down there and met everybody, talked to everybody. You know there was no such thing as home delivery. It was the place to gather.

Then, paved roads. That was a big change. A very good change. Of course Safeway, which is a rather recent development.

Let me see. Different roads; all the different roads that were created. If you go down Rezanof, now it is absolutely nothing like what it used to be. It's so hard even to envision what it was like. If you go Mill Bay Road across to Woodland Acres, and somehow shortly into Woodland Acres the road curved to the left and you went out towards Mill Bay and Monashka. But it's totally, totally different from what it is now. So the road systems, all the new roads make it look really different.

DH: Do you think that there's any big changes that you've noticed in what people do in Kodiak now? I mean, not occupations so much, but just what they do?

SDB: Well, this is not directly your question, but one other thing that just came to my mind is when I first came,

if we had four cars in a row you'd say, "Whoa, where's everybody going!" It was a traffic jam. Now it's a little different. It takes a little while just to get out of our driveway now, where before it took no time at all.

Different things that people do? I think that there's more traveling. It would not be unusual for children never to have gotten off the island when I first came. They could go through their whole elementary school years and never leave the island. This is obviously very different.

People are still outdoorsy I think. If you don't like the outdoors, this is definitely not a place to be.

DH: Are there any events from '70 to '96 that you think have changed Kodiak? You said it's grown so much and has so much more traffic and things. Do you think one event, or what do you think was the cause of a lot of the changes?

SDB: Well, when I first came to Kodiak the one thing that was so remarkable to me was the children's ability to stand in awe of nature. They really knew how to protect things. They were just absolutely thrilled when they saw the first dandelion appear in the spring. Nobody could walk on it. Nobody could walk on any of the wildflowers. These were sacred to them. We would stop class, in the middle of class, and we would look out the window. If the classroom was on the playground side, they would look out and say, "Look! Look at the sunrise!" If they were on the front side of the building, they would look out at the same time and look at the glow of the sunrise on the snow covered mountains in the winter. And everything would stop. Well, we looked out the window in silent awe of the beauty.

I noticed a gradual change. And it was gradual.

Children no longer noticed it themselves. I would have to point it out, and it would be with difficulty to rev up their awe and wonder at it. They no longer were so careful about stepping on little flowers. By the time I put all of that together, and I tried to put it into a picture, into a time frame, the best I could come up with was the advent of television. When we had more television available to us, we had less sensitivity to the beauty of nature.

DH: I can see that, with the kids' interests nowadays. Did you ever do any work in any other areas of Alaska, except for around Kodiak island?

SDB: Well, for years the Sisters used to go out to Adak and do summer religion classes for two weeks. So I went out probably about eighteen years. Each time, we would rarely go alone, though I did go alone once or twice, but we usually went two or three. It just depended on how many that the navy wanted to come out. And we worked with the children. I frequently worked with the children in the daytime, and then had adult classes in the evening. And I prepared the religion teachers so that they could carry on the teaching during the school year. And so I would come out in the summertime to field any questions, or to retrain new ones, or to do further inservices for them. As well as teach the children.

It was a wonderful experience! Really different, because of the remoteness of Adak and it being just a military base. And we would have to receive military orders in order to go onto the island and in order to deplane when we got there. It was all very formal, and foreign actually, to most of my other kind of lifestyle. But very interesting. We developed lots of good

friendships and kept in touch frequently. Well, for years we kept in touch with our friends out there. We went, I think our last trip to Adak was in '86 maybe.

DH: Well, how was Adak different than Kodiak? I mean with how it looks.

SDB: Oh! It's almost totally treeless. They've got one very small area that's called the Adak National Forest. There's a big sign that says "You are now entering and leaving Adak National Forest". The trees are stunted, they're very short because of the winds. And the total area of the National Forest, so to speak, would fit into this office, which is... what would you say this was? About 8' by 12' or 15', somewhere around there. So, very small. And apart from that there are no other trees. It's tundra, lots of wild flowers, gently rolling hills. Quite beautiful. It has its own beauty.

DH: It sounds nice. Uh, you've been teaching the entire time that you've been at St. Mary's?

SDB: Yes.

DH: How long did you teach?

SDB: Before I came here?

DH: No, before you became the principal.

SDB: Oh, I was teaching, I think two years. (Laugh)

DH: That's all?

SDB: Well, I was principal before I came up here. I was principal in the school in that, um, in Mahanai City, before I came up. And when I came here, I came as a first and second grade teacher, because at that time we had just four classrooms. And each classroom had two grades in it. So I had the first and second grade. The next year I had the seventh and eighth grade. But, we did team teaching or departmental teaching, so I had the seventh and eighth grade homeroom, but I taught fifth and sixth grade social studies and language arts. While the homeroom teacher of the fifth and sixth grade did the math and science of both of those classrooms.

DH: So, after you became principal, did you still teach some and be principal at the same time?

SDB: Oh yes. I taught, full time teaching actually, for I don't really remember how many years. And it's probably just as well I don't. (Laugh) I had a full time load as well as being principal. Then I went to a half time. And then I dropped back to just being religion teachers in classes that needed me, and doing French throughout the grades.

Then a few years ago Fru Finn said she would be glad to teach half of the French. Well actually, Rita, Rita Stevens taught the lower grades French. She relieved me of half my French classes. Then, Fru said that she would take half, the half that Rita had, and she found out that it wasn't so difficult, so she said that she would be glad to take all of it. Well, at that point, I became just a principal. A non-teaching principal.

DH: What would you say were a couple of your major goals

as principal of St. Mary's School?

SDB: Throughout the years it has been to maintain a family spirit, a welcoming atmosphere that gave the signs to people that everyone was welcome. That this was not a school for the elite. That we would do anything and everything to make their children feel happy and warm fuzzies inside, and welcomed. So we do a lot of loving as you know. They get hugged coming in, they get hugged going out. It's part of a long, long tradition. And it has always been my goal never to change that part. But, it has also been my goal to keep curriculum current and as competitive as possible, because I think that's a matter of justice for our families.

DH: Wonderful. I know the number of children attending the school has grown over the years. Can you tell me about how many students were here in 1970 and how many there are now?

SDB: Yes. There were somewhere in the nineties in 1970. Maybe like 97, 98 - upper nineties. Today we have about 208 I believe.

DH: What do you think is the reason for the more than doubling?

SDB: Well, actually in 1989 we added, we put in the preschool/kindergarten. And we knew when we did that we would have to eliminate the double grades because the full kindergarten would move up to a single first grade, and wouldn't allow for doubles. So then we began planning, well before we allowed the kindergarten to happen, we

had to take a look at our ability to add on classrooms. That being possible, we went to the kindergarten and the preschool and then gradually went to single grades each year. And that's what filled the classrooms, the full kindergarten moving into the first grade.

DH: So before you reorganized like that you really had more people, more children, wanting to come here than could come here and then you were able to reorganize and accept more?

SDB: There were so many people that kept begging us to have kindergarten. And we said, "Well, we could have kindergarten but then we would have to eliminate seventh and eighth grade." They said, "Well, no, we want both." So I said, "Simply not possible." So the numbers in seventh and eighth grade never equaled or came close to the numbers in all the other grades. So we decided we really ought to take a look at that and do a feasibility study to see financially could we continue to serve such a few number of seventh and eighth graders. So we decided in 1988 that the following year, after having studied of course several years, that in 1989 we would eliminate seventh and eighth grade and put in kindergarten. And we gave the parents fair warning, because the numbers just weren't in those two grade levels, and they hadn't been for at least five years. They hadn't been increasing at all. So we did that, and several years, let's see when was it, I've lost track of the timing. But a few years later the parents said, "Well, now since you've added on those four classrooms, (which we did in 1991, we added those on) how about putting seventh and eighth grade back in." So we said, "Well, we'll try it. We'll give it a try and see how

it fares." So we did. We let the sixth grade move into seventh grade and then the eighth grade last year. So last year's eighth grade was the first graduating class of the second portion of our experiment here I guess. If you want to call it that.

DH: Do you think that the goals of St. Mary's Church and the school have changed much in the time you have been here?

SDB: No, I don't think so, not really. The goals haven't changed. Perhaps the population has somewhat changed. We've always had a large Filipino population in our parish. And now the parish has grown to a rather sizable Latino population. So if you come to mass on any given Sunday, you would not know exactly what country you're in because we have equal numbers of Asians, Latinos, and Caucasians.

DH: Are there any stories or memories of Kodiak, when you first arrived or recent, that you'd like to share?

SDB: One memory I have is a field trip that the children took. I don't really remember what year it was, but it was probably early seventies. There was a beached whale at Rosalind Beach. And it was kind of an exciting event. So Jim Eggemeyer, Jim Senior Eggemeyer, decided he would rent a bus for us. So we put as many children in the bus as we could, and that was probably first through fourth grade, and took them out the road and they got a chance to see this beached whale. Not only see it, they actually stood on it, (Laugh) from nose to tail they stood on the whale. And there was a photographer from, I don't know if it was Alaska Magazine or National Geographic, but a

popular magazine, that was out and about and happened to see the whole thing and they took the picture. And lo and behold we found our children in this magazine. (Laugh)

DH: Oh, that sounds wonderful.

SDB: Another thing that I can recall is, again I don't remember the exact dates but in the seventies sometime, we had what was called the Kodiak Regional Dorm. I think that's what it was. It was housing for students that came from the villages. And not just the villages that came from Kodiak. I know there were high school students, and these were high school students that came from the villages to go to school here in Kodiak. And to them it was a big city. These were students from Hooper Bay and Tonunk and Tuksuk Bay and when they got to Kodiak they were scared. They were just going to their bedrooms, at least this group of students, and they were just afraid to come out.

Well I found out that the children from these villages were mostly Catholic. So I used to go down and visit them. And bring them up and they would join our CYO group, our Catholic Youth Organization, and I would take them out and bring them to the convent to visit. Their greatest joy was to get in a car. Just to get in a car and go for a ride! So I would put them in the car and we would go out on the road just for a ride. And that was their greatest joy. When the dorms closed because they had high school in the villages, I continued to hear from a couple of them. They would call, just out of the blue, years after they were gone. They'd call and they'd say, "Do you remember me? I used to go to the high school there and live in the dorm." It was just a wonderful experience and I really miss them.

But I know their going to school in their own villages is much more valuable to them.

SDB: When I first came in 1970, the Navy was on base. And their children, a number of their children, came to our school. And special services supplied a bus, and transported the children to and from school every single day. We had our own school bus for the rest, so that would tell you how small our numbers were.

But in 1972, I believe, the Navy pulled out and the Coast Guard came in. And they continued their services for a short time, but really they didn't have the bus. The bus that the Navy used was not being kept up so they didn't have that. And then we began to get public school busing.

DH: Well, that's interesting about the change from the Navy to Coast Guard.

SDB: And we went out to the base too to teach CCD, a religion class that is. So we were part of the base life and part of town life.

DH: Both when it was Navy and Coast Guard?

SDB: And Coast Guard, yes.

DH: Well, thank you so much for your time, memories, and information, Sister, I really appreciate it.

SDB: You're very welcome. Thanks for the opportunity to recall fond memories.

Note:

DH is Donna Hammel

SDB is Sister Diane Bardol

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