Opinion
Guest Voices
Appreciation



Rosemary Torrence stands with Lakewood Catholic Academy second graders wearing the headbands she crocheted for them. After retiring from teaching 34 years at St. Edward High School in Lakewood, Ohio, she volunteered at Lakewood. (Courtesy of Courtney Ryan)



by Christine Schenk

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I recently lost a cherished forever friend, Rosemary Torrence, who died unexpectedly Nov. 11. Rosie was a legend at all-boys St. Edward High School in Lakewood, Ohio, where she chaired the theology department until her retirement in 2012. For 34 years she taught theology to every incoming freshman class.

St. Edward principal KC McKenna emailed a statement that said in part: "For those of you who didn't know Rosie, she had a larger-than-life personality and was a favorite colleague to so many of us. Most of the alumni on our staff had the great privilege of being taught freshman theology by her."

"She was one of the first teachers we had," recalls Edward alumnus Matt Wallenhorst, now the school's dean of student life and culture. "Her course was on Christian identity, which was about finding Jesus in yourself as a young teen male with all the questions that are going on in your life."

We often take for granted the dedicated women and men who teach in our Catholic primary and secondary schools, but we shouldn't. They exercise a huge influence on our children, quietly sowing seeds for successful, faith-filled futures. We remember certain teachers forever.

Rose Torrence is one of those teachers.



Rosemary Torrence, who taught for 34 years at St. Edward High School in Lakewood, Ohio, died Nov. 11. (Courtesy of St. Edward High School)

She was also unusually diminutive. A childhood epiphyseal fracture had arrested her growth, leaving her standing at just 4 feet, 8 inches tall. Although the "Ed's men" towered above her, they also worshiped the ground she walked on.

Former student James Wallenhorst (Matt's brother) explains: "She never had to raise her voice ... She knew how to call out a (misbehaving) student without seeming angry or upset, but always with this calm confidence."

St. Ed's Latin teacher Daniel Cavoli concurs. "With one look, Rose Torrance could silence a hundred high school boys — the football players, the wrestlers, anyone. ... It wasn't necessarily a stern look," he said. "It was more like, 'Come on guys, like, let's get real.' They trusted her and they knew how much she loved them."

Cavoli met Rose his senior year at a rival Catholic boys' high school where she was then teaching. He was a "big brother" to a freshman who tearfully told him about a bullying episode instigated by a senior classmate. Cavoli was devastated and sought out "Miss Torrence."

"I think I actually did start to cry, I was so disillusioned," Cavoli recalls. "She put me at ease and introduced me to a concept I now call 'the Rosie Torrance vision of compassion.' " Torrence quickly addressed the situation, and a profoundly repentant senior apologized to all involved. Thereafter Cavoli often sought out Miss Torrence for mentoring and advice: "She just seemed like a person I wanted to have in my life."

While majoring in religious studies and the classics at Holy Cross, Cavoli sometimes telephoned her to talk theology. He remembers discussing a "quintessential quote" about Jesus: "The Son of God became a Son of Man so that the sons of men could become sons of God." This insight led Cavoli to conclude "the more Godlike we become, the more human we become." After hanging up, he remembers thinking: "Rose is kind of an embodiment of that quote. ... So few people have this magical ability to literally become more practical, more feet on the ground, the farther they soar in their spirituality."

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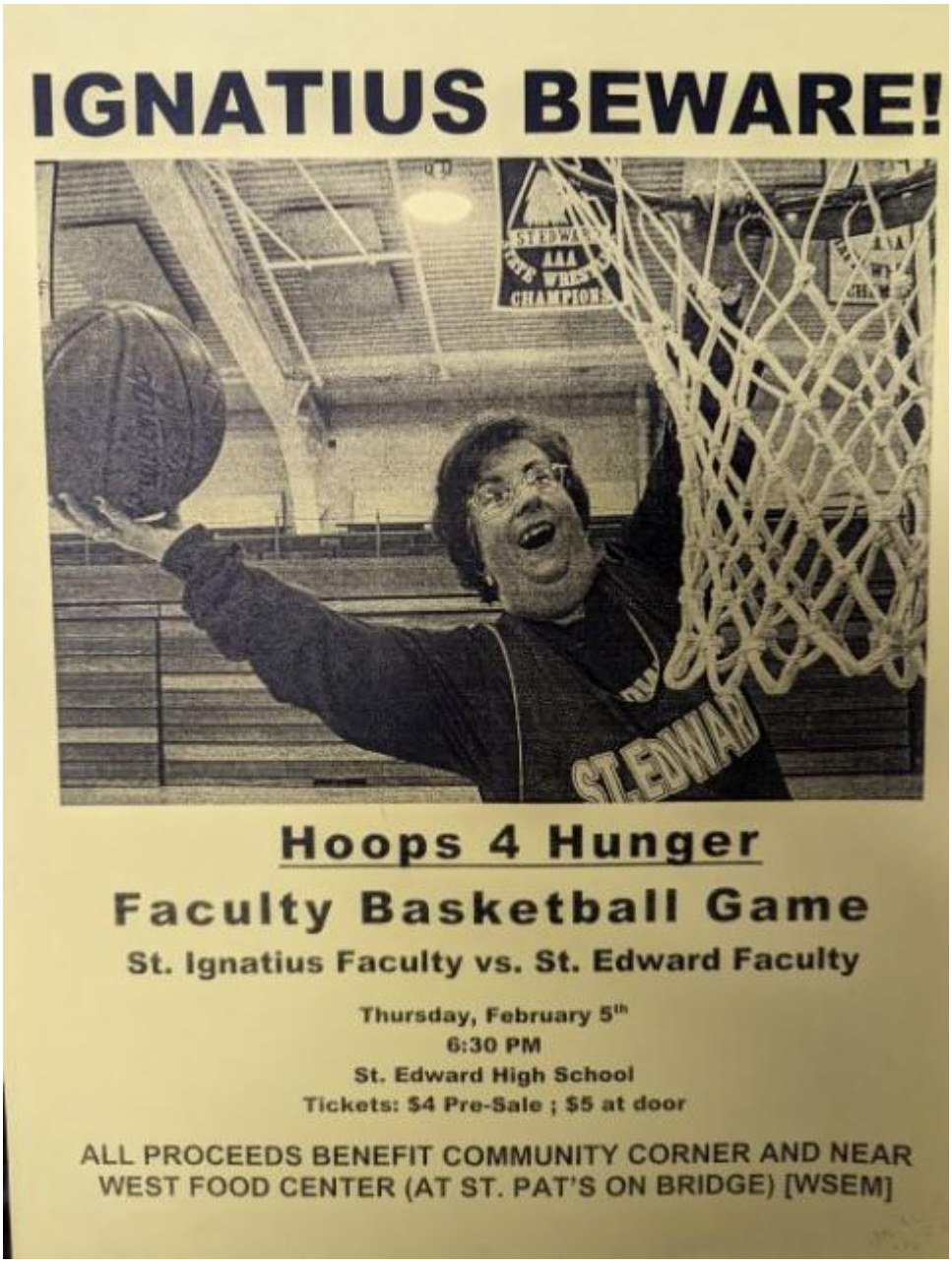
When Cavoli began his first teaching job at a rural Ohio Catholic high school, he became frustrated by student resistance to his Vatican II teaching about social justice. He called Rose. She urged patience: "You're telling them things that are blowing their minds," he said she told him. "You can get into intellectual and political stuff, but remember at the end of the day, what must come out is that you are enriching their faith, because that's the most important thing. With high school kids, you're more of a religion teacher than a theology teacher. They need to know that you love them."

Cavoli returned to Cleveland and eventually accepted a position teaching Latin — his first love — at St. Edward. He quickly noticed how much faculty members relied

upon Rose. "She was clearly the person that everybody seemed to look to for leadership, which she did with such humility," he said. "And maybe that's why everybody looked to her, because she was so unassuming."

Today Cavoli is a widely acclaimed Latin teacher in his own right. His students have won many awards. More importantly they know how much he cares: "Few teachers bring themselves so completely, heart and mind, to class every single day in the way that Mr. Cavoli does," wrote a student in 2015. Rose must surely be proud of her protégé.

Matt Wallenhorst greatly admired Rose's ability to laugh and make people feel comfortable about her short stature: "It made everybody else feel comfortable about their own [perceived] difference, whatever it was."



A flyer featuring the diminutive Rosemary Torrence slam-dunking a basketball promotes a benefit faculty game between St. Edward and St. Ignatius. (Courtesy of St. Edward High School/Thomas Carey)

Stories abound about Rose's participation on the faculty basketball team wearing her famous number "½" jersey. Each year the school held a rally to get students excited about selling raffle tickets. The high point was watching a video in which "Miss T" made a slam dunk, wearing her famous jersey. "She was in front of a green screen, and you could tell she was climbing up a ladder to get the ball to the hoop," recalls an amused Wallenhorst.

In her retirement years Rose volunteered helping second-grade teachers at Lakewood Catholic Academy. Mary Valletta remembers, "I don't think there was a kid that she couldn't work with. I learned from her. She was able to connect with each of them. That's huge because that's how they learn."

Courtney Ryan's second graders loved her so much that Ryan had to make a rule requiring the children to stay in their seats when "Miss Rosie" arrived. Otherwise, she said, "they would bombard her to try and hug her." The children also clamored to do math flashcards with Miss Rosie. "She was like the Pied Piper," chuckled Ryan. "Everyone was in Miss Rosie's flashcard group."

Rose loved hand crocheting warm headbands for her precious second graders each year.

Ryan also learned from Miss Rosie. "I'd get frustrated with a student or a policy, and she was always able to ground it back to the mission. And she did it with a wonderful sense of humor. She had a funny reminder: 'They're still a child of God and you love them even though you want to rip your hair out.' "

For the last two years of her life, Rose again achieved legendary status at The Renaissance retirement community, where she quickly became a dynamic and much-loved resident. She visited frail neighbors, wrote poetry and helped to launch the Renaissance Drama Club as a costume designer and production manager. The club's production of "Guys and Dolls" enjoyed a sold-out two-week run and involved scores of cast members, some in their 80s and 90s. Her death was keenly felt by her Renaissance friends.

St. Edward High School also received an outpouring of love and appreciation for their departed teacher. "It showed that she touched a lot of lives," said Matt Wallenhorst. "And I think that's what every teacher would want."

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Rose is mourned by two living sisters who accompanied her in her final illness, Jeannie Hauer and Mary Jane Dike; her Chicago brother David, and many nieces, nephews and cousins. At her funeral, the eulogy concluded with a prescient poem she had written just weeks earlier.

It well reflects Rose's love and appreciation for God's little ones, among whom she may be the foremost.

Only the coldest of hearts
Would resist the hand of a child
Wrapping warmly around their palm
Inviting them to a walk.

What a joy to discover
That our eerie image of death
As a faceless specter in wispy clothes
Is not even close to the way it goes!

Could it not be children instead
That meet us when we're finally dead
With outstretched hands and angelic grins
To lead us to where our new life begins?

If our image of God is a judge who's dour
The specter of death fits our final hour.
But if ABBA's revealed in truth as LOVE
Then Joy not judgment awaits above.

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