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## GESU TRANSITIONS TO E-LEARNING WITHOUT SKIPPING A BEAT

BY M.B. DILLON

For many in the U.S., the switch to distance learning in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic posed big problems. With schools shuttered, the lack of Internet access and digital devices made online classes an impossibility for countless students and educators. Not true for the Gesu Giants.

“The entire school was very well-poised to move to e-learning,” said Gesu Principal Christa Laurin. “We were talking about this well before the governor issued the order to close all the schools. We kind of saw what was coming down, and started planning a couple weeks before.

“Our middle-school students were doing things online all along when it came to subjects including language arts and math,” Laurin said. Computer literacy is a Gesu forte, thanks to its inclusion in the curriculum and the purchase and donation several years ago of Chromebooks.

“We had one classroom set of Chromebooks, but very generous, visionary donors — Paul Schervish and his wife Terese Chipman — gave us two more sets,” said Laurin. All grades except first and second have used the laptops on an ongoing basis. “Many families have access to online learning with their own laptops or they have iPads. For those who don’t, we loaned out Chromebooks for the duration of the school closure,” the principal said.

Gesu teachers — adept with technology like Google Meet and document cameras — quickly began instructing students from home, much like

they’d be doing in school. “We are continuing, moving these children along with learning they would have gotten in the classroom,” Laurin said. “We are not doing merely review. That’s not what we are offering at Gesu. We’re offering a true education through e-learning.”

Unlike many schools opting to evaluate students’ work with the pass-fail system, “our students’ work is actually graded,” said Laurin. “We are doing work that meets the archdiocesan standards. Students will get full credit when they receive a final report card and are promoted to the next grade. They will be ready for next year.”

Fifth-grade teacher Shawn Kaley said once the staff made sure all students had access to the Internet, a device to use, and their textbooks, things fell into place and students adapted well. “Unfortunately it took the coronavirus, but I think we found the silver lining here; using the distance-learning format to leverage technology,” Kaley said. “This is a big shift in students’ lives,” he added. Dealing with the pandemic has of course been difficult for children. “But we’re learning that they are more resilient than most folks. They’re coping well. They are figuring it out.”

School days begin with prayer and greetings from Principal Laurin and assistant principal Daniel Timmis via Facebook. Teachers and students log onto Google Meet, which enables them to see and hear one another on the screen. “It’s a way for the

*Older students read to younger students in the halls of Gesu School. PHOTO CREDIT: JENNIFER THEBAULT*



*The 8th-grade class meets in front of the National Museum of African American History in Washington, D.C. during its class trip to the nation’s capital. PHOTO CREDIT: ANITA SEVIER*

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E-LEARNING, CONT.

children to feel connected not only with their teacher, but their fellow students,” said Kaley. “As you know, students at this age are very social, so this is a vehicle for them to socialize. I’ll add that it is a little more of a struggle to actually teach in a distance-learning format. Trying to keep their attention is far more challenging than having 22 children in a room in a controlled environment.”

Teachers use Google Meet and electronic dry-erase boards to present lessons, assign homework and provide links to websites and articles. Realizing that in some homes, devices are shared by siblings, Google classes are offered at multiple times. Students take pictures of their completed work, save it to the computer, upload it and turn it in. Teachers correct assignments, and return them with comments to students.



Mr. Kaley prepares lessons for his 5th-grade class from his dining room table.  
PHOTO CREDIT: KEITHANTHONY MORALES

“Nothing had to go by the wayside,” said Kaley, referring to coaching, tutoring, and specials like band and computer. “The specials teachers became co-teachers. For example, Mr. Ashton electronically came into my class and issued a band assignment. He told the students to take a picture of themselves practicing their instrument, to complete their log, and turn it in.” The computer and health teachers used the same method to reach their students.

“The beauty of distance learning is that you can do more one-on-one engagement with students than you can in the classroom,” said Kaley. Teachers can tailor instruction to meet individuals at precisely

their level. “The more difficult situations are with the very young students, where so much of it is paper and pencil. You have to develop students’ fine motor skills, so that is a little bit more of a challenge,” said Laurin. Gesu parents are stepping up, “scanning or taking pictures of completed workbook assignments, and sending them to the teachers.”

Admittedly, measuring comprehension and assessment “is a tough nut to crack,” said Kaley. “I think for the most part, parents are making their children do the work. We are continually looking for ways to offer, and then be able to get, authentic assessments. Generally it is going well.”

Laurin is proud of the Gesu team. “I saw so many of the teachers helping one another to get familiar with resources for online and distance learning,” she said. “They took the document cameras home and honed their skills, recording themselves and doing things from home. The only staff here at school are two lunchroom staffers who are making lunches and handing them out every day. They’re prepared to serve 50 daily, but are serving on average 25 a day, Monday through Friday. They’re working hard, God bless them.”

The principal also commended Gesu students, who are making the best of difficult circumstances, working hard and meeting the challenge. “We want our children to be successful. They can’t be successful if we halt their learning and they have no education through the end of the year and all summer,” she said. “Half a year of education is not good.”

Kaley is just as encouraged. With all the teamwork and effort he’s seeing, he is confident “we will hit the ground running in the fall. That is our goal.”



PHOTO CREDIT: JENNIFER THEBAULT

ALUMNI NOTES

**William Jerome Maurer '47:** 85 years young and living the dream. I think of my days at Gesu School — was it all just a dream? Those fabulous nuns!

**Rowland Hill '49:** I so much appreciate what Gesu is doing. Annual tuition when I attended in the 1940’s was \$6. I would love to contribute more. You are in my prayers. Thanks for all you do.

**Grace Mather '55:** Wow! In 1955 school tuition was \$25/family!!

**John Ceru '57:** I’m still mountain biking and enjoying the mountains!

**Richard Cunningham '57:** I really appreciate my education especially since my students could not get possessions right. I am enjoying retirement.

**Joseph Bartush '63:** In loving memory of Stephen J. and Mary A. Bartush. Early contributors to Gesu School and Church.

**Marguerite Harasymczuk Coppens '64:** I always reminisce about my classmates, my teachers and the solid education I received. Thanks for the memories.

**Nigel Fullick '66:** Looking forward to visiting Gesu when I attend my 50<sup>th</sup> high school reunion in April at UDJ. I appreciate the newsletters.

**Paul Hathaway '66:** Great work Gesu!!

**Kevin Fermoye '69:** We are glad the tradition of Catholic school continues!

**Diane Hyde '69:** Still praying for married priests and women priests to replenish the priesthood and utilize all Catholics and their gifts.

**Suzanne Schaefer McKinnon '70:** Fond memories of the friendships and excellent education I and my family received at Gesu!

**Andrew Howe '73:** So proud to have attended Gesu back in the 70’s!

**Dr. Suzanne Tanguay, Ph.D. '77:** I have such fond memories of Gesu and I am happy that a great Gesu education is still available to students of today.

**Kevin VanLowe '81:** I currently live in Maryland with my wife and 2 kids. My son will be graduating this year from high school.

**Norm Dickson, SJ:** Keep up the good work!

REUNION CANCELLED

Due to the coronavirus pandemic, Gesu School’s all-class reunion — scheduled for July 10-12, 2020 in commemoration of Gesu’s 95th year — has been cancelled.

“I am so disappointed that we won’t be having our reunion this year. But we really had no choice,” said California’s Kevin Lesinski '70, organizer of the event at the Heathers Club of Bloomfield Hills. “I’m happy to reschedule it for 2021, but I would feel a lot more comfortable knowing that there was a vaccine available for the coronavirus before doing so.” The Class of 1970 was looking forward to its 50th reunion and celebrating with other alumni.



Some of the 8th-grade girls in front of the Washington Monument during their excursion to various Smithsonian museums.  
PHOTO CREDIT: ANITA SEVIER

## A WIN-WIN: LEAVE YOUR LEGACY & HELP GESU

BY M.B. DILLON

It's Gesu ingenuity at its finest. With user-friendly, tax-efficient methods, generous Gesu alumni are leaving a lasting legacy and simultaneously donating to their alma mater.

For individuals 70½ and older, "the best way to do it right now is through a direct charitable gift from your taxable IRA," said Brett Baker, tax manager for Plante Moran Financial Advisors. "The beneficiary of the IRA doesn't receive the money at all. You never touch the money; it goes straight from the IRA custodian to a named charity in whatever dollar amount you decide. That way, the distribution never becomes income to the owner. It's something that can be set up on an annual basis."

Referred to as a Qualified Charitable Deduction, or QCD, it is tax-free because the amount transferred from the IRA to the charity is not included in the IRA-holder's taxable income. "This is an effective vehicle for contributing to charities that are of importance to taxpayers. It's a good way to maximize the benefit

of the tax law that's out there right now," said Baker. "It's very approachable, and very easy to set up and get done. There's not a whole lot of hoops to jump through, and no long-term commitments."

The late Don Bridenstine, '53, who in retirement spent many hours volunteering at Gesu, made Gesu the recipient of a QCD from his traditional IRA account. "Don and several donors very supportive of Gesu have utilized this in the past," said Anita Sevier, Gesu development and alumni relations coordinator. "It enabled them to give to Gesu and to save on their taxes."

Another donor — a doctor who lives out-of-state and requested anonymity — gives in this way for several reasons. Why does he contribute to his grade school? "The education I received was outstanding," he said. "I still remember my dad writing checks to Gesu, and we didn't have anything. I hope the gift in some small way can lift someone in need at this time, so they too will grow to be a moral person and successful in everything they do. Maybe they in turn can pay it forward."

## GESU DEVELOPMENT AND ALUMNI RELATIONS COORDINATOR

Anita Sevier is the development and alumni relations coordinator for Gesu School. She has volunteered and worked at Gesu since 1996 and has been a parishioner with her husband and three children for 31 years. If you have any questions about donating to Gesu or you are trying to find a long lost friend, Anita will do her best to find answers for you. Gesu welcomes support and participation from all its alumni and friends. Please contact her at [sevier.a@gesudetroit.org](mailto:sevier.a@gesudetroit.org), (313) 863-4677 x-020, or (313) 460-6051 (c).



## NOTICE ABOUT THE CARES ACT

The CARES Act incentivizes people to increase their charitable giving to non-profits in the midst of the pandemic. There is an above-the-line deduction for non-itemizers for up to \$300 for cash contributions made during 2020 to public charities and the removal of the cap on the deductibility of cash contributions for those who itemize. These incentives are meant to encourage people to donate, so non-profit organizations can continue to provide necessary services and meet increased demand.

## GESU ALUMNA PUBLISHES ACCLAIMED DEBUT NOVEL

BY KATIE KERWIN '70

*Remembrance*, the debut novel of author Rita Woods '70, tells the stories of four black women over more than 200 years, from an enslaved mother in 1791 Saint-Domingue (what is now Haiti) on the eve of revolution to a nurse's aide in present-day Cleveland. The book also is set in 1857 New Orleans amid a yellow fever outbreak and in *Remembrance*, a sanctuary settlement on the Underground Railroad whose presence is concealed through the magic of its founder.

The women in Woods' story wield supernatural powers to heal, foresee the future and shape events and objects as they struggle with family separation, anguish and survival. She weaves together African and vodun traditions with quantum physics. The book was launched in January to critical praise. *The Boston Globe* called it "breathtaking" and "a grand tale." NPR declared it an "ambitious, absorbing novel."

Woods began writing as a student at Gesu School, which she attended with siblings Curtis, Lea and Howard, before going on to Immaculata High School. Despite her love of writing, family expecta-

tions steered her into medicine. College at Purdue University led to a medical degree from Howard University and later a private practice near Chicago as a family doctor.

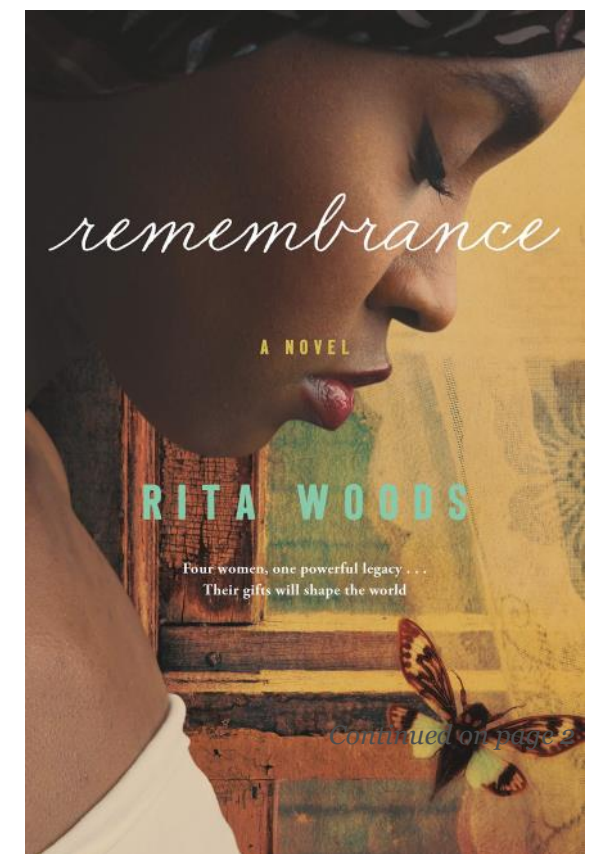
Along the way, Woods married Kenneth Echols, a high school teacher, and they had two sons, Jonathan and Logan (now 26 and 22, respectively). Jonathan and his 7-year-old daughter Serenity — the apple of her grandmother's eye — live with his parents. Logan attends college in Toronto.

Over the years, Woods' punishing schedule in private practice while on the staff of four hospitals left scant time to write. She began working on *Remembrance* nine years ago, eking out time in the early mornings and on weekends. When the novel was finished, she landed an agent and discovered the challenges of selling a book that transcends genres. "Publishers would say, 'We love it, but we don't know what it is. Is it women's fiction, historical or science fiction?'," she recalls. "That was frustrating." Woods' agent pulled the book from consideration until 2018, when a second try paid off.

The author began a national book tour in February, including a reading at the Detroit Public Library that drew Gesu and Immaculata friends. The magical

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Rita Woods poses with a display of her newly-published book, *Remembrance*.



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## ANGEL FUND IS HEAVEN-SENT FOR GESU FAMILIES

BY M.B. DILLON

Gesu mom Felicia Watson of Detroit wishes she could meet Joseph Bartush of California and his sister Susan Bartush Cugliari of Connecticut to say thank you. Their J. Addison and Marion M. Bartush Family Foundation, named for the siblings' father and mother, was instrumental in establishing Gesu's tuition assistance program, known as the Angel Fund.

Like numerous Gesu parents, Watson qualifies for a yearly \$1,000 grant, making her child's tuition of \$4,600 affordable. "I wish I could meet the Bartushes to say thank you and tell them how much this scholarship means to me. I'd give them a big hug," said Watson. "I have one child, whom I love dearly. When it was time for her to go to school, my main concern was for her safety, and for her to get a good education. I researched schools, and Gesu had a wonderful reputation. All I could think was, 'How can I send her there?'"

Five years later, Watson says, "I can see the growth in my daughter. She is getting a great education. I think sometimes as parents, we forget to say thank you. This \$1,000 is what helps keep my daughter at Gesu. It helps me tremendously," said Watson, who's single and the sole supporter of her daughter and mother.

At a time when Gesu truly needed an angel, the J. Addison and Marion M. Bartush Family Foundation appeared. "In 2015, it was evident we needed to start a scholarship fund for Gesu students," said Anita Sevier, Gesu development and alumni relations coordinator. "In early 2015, 17 donors started this fund and raised \$9,530. This was a good start, but not enough to support a financial assistance program. In the fall of 2015 as we celebrated Gesu's 90th anniversary, the Bartushes' foundation came forward with the very generous grant of \$75,000, which laid the groundwork for the newly-formed Angel Fund. Their donation gave us the foundation we needed to start this scholarship fund and make it possible to start assisting needy Gesu families."

Since then, many donors and alumni have helped grow the Angel Fund, which to date has aided 101 students and raised more than \$289,000. Gifts in any amount are welcome.



Gesu students share a book.  
PHOTO CREDIT: JENNIFER THEBAULT

"In the past, families would call up and say, 'I would really love my child to go to Gesu, but we don't have the means to make this happen,'" said Principal Christa Laurin. "Unless they were Catholic, there were no options. The scholarship fund Fr. Scullin (a former Gesu pastor) set up with the Bartush family opened a door for parents. Our families make huge sacrifices to send their children to us. The Angel Fund helps them keep sending their children to us."

### CORONAVIRUS

"Due to the coronavirus, so many families have either lost their jobs, been laid off or their paychecks have been cut; some of them drastically," said Laurin. "It's going to be critical — more than ever — to have this fund in place. We give out over \$30,000 per year. I can see that easily doubling depending on what happens here."

Well before cases of the virus peaked in Wayne County, Gesu began receiving requests for help. "One of our parents, a single dad with two children, came forward to tell us he lost his job and now can't find a job," said Sevier. "He requested assistance from the Angel Fund, and we are going to give it to him. Due to the generosity of the J. Addison and Marion M. Bartush Family Foundation — and the Bartush children making the decision to give — we are able to accommodate this dad. We know there will be many others. Donations we receive from alumni help us respond to our families."

Looking back, Laurin is beyond grateful. "As initial donors, the Bartushes had the foresight to see this need out there, and the value of Gesu education," said the principal. "They recognized that in order for more students to be able to receive a Gesu education, there was going to have to be some sort of bridge to cover the financial gap families had. I don't know if they even realize the impact they've had on families. It's been a huge blessing to the Gesu family and the school as a whole. The donors who continue to give

are keeping the dream alive for a lot of families."

The Watson family can attest to that. "I remember one year considering taking Nylin, my daughter, to another school to save money. She literally cried, telling me she wanted to stay at Gesu. Gesu is her second home; she loves it," said Felicia Watson.

Rising 6th-grader Nylin says, "Gesu teachers are really nice. Learning is easier and fun. I feel safe and very close to everybody. The kids are nice and always like open to making friends. I like gym class and sports. I do basketball and track, and it's really fun."

Nylin's mother hopes that in the future, "we can give back and help another child attend Gesu. We know a lot of people who wish they could send their kids here."

"Gesu School has been continually in existence since 1925," said Laurin. "It was a beacon of hope when all the other Catholic schools were closing. Gesu kept going. Having people give in this manner ensures that Gesu will continue to be a stronghold in the community."

## GESU ALUMNA, CONT.

realism of *Remembrance* has also taken Woods into new territory, including a Comic-Con in Chicago later that month. Besides being engulfed by a Sailor Moon flash mob — picture several hundred people dressed up as Japanese schoolgirl anime superheroes — she participated in panels with authors of books featuring wizards and interplanetary travel. "I was kind of an outlier," Woods admits. "But one of the advantages is expanding how I think about my own writing."

It was her last big event before the coronavirus shut down most of the country. She's still hoping to attend the rescheduled Los Angeles Times Festival of Books in October.

Back in 2016, Woods became medical director of the Wellness Center of Pipefitters Local 597 in Mokena, Ill. She loves the job, and the regular hours without weekend demands or hospital rounds allow her time to write and promote her book.

Woods is now working on a novel about a

midwife in Detroit's Paradise Valley/Black Bottom neighborhood in the 1930s-40s. She's fascinated by the "amazing history" of the thriving African American community on the city's near east side in that era. On her wall at home, she's got a giant map of Detroit with historical neighborhoods marked off as she aims to complete a first draft by July.

Also awaiting publication is her second book, *The Last Dream Walker*, a fantasy novel about a young woman descended from the Geechee residents of South Carolina's coastal islands. The protagonist, who can manifest her dreams as reality, tries to use her abilities to transform her dysfunctional family.

If you'd like to know more about Woods' writing, her family and her life — including raising chickens and training as a body builder — go to the Gesu School website for an expanded version of this story.

To contribute by check, you may use the bi-annual appeal card you receive in the mail. Please designate "Angel Fund" on the card. Or you may donate online at <https://www.gesuschool.udmercy.edu>. Please indicate in the memo field that your donation is for the Angel Fund. You may also contact Anita Sevier, the development and alumni relations coordinator, at [sevier.a@gesudetroit.org](mailto:sevier.a@gesudetroit.org), (313) 863-4677 x-020, or (313) 460-6051 (c).