



Students and teachers gather in front of the school some time in the early 1930s.



Alicia Gonzalez Neve donated the land and start-up money for Mary Help of Christians School.

Photographs provided by Mary Help of Christians School

'A piece of heaven'

School started as refuge for homeless boys

Mary Help of Christians School, commemorating its 60th anniversary, owes its beginnings to a woman who gave virtually everything she owned to help homeless children.

Alicia Gonzalez Neve, widow of Tampa's first dentist, decided in the 1920s that the worldly wealth she had accumulated could best be used to found an orphanage that would provide an educational boost for young boys.

Although Mary Help of Christians is now a private school that admits day students, it still extends a helping hand to "modern-day orphans from broken homes, one-family homes."

On Saturday, a solemn liturgy of thanksgiving was to be celebrated at the school to mark the anniversary. The Papal Nuncio to the United States, Archbishop Pio Laghi, and diocesan Bishop W. Thomas Larlin presided over the liturgy.

Predominant in the memories of the school's beginnings are those of the "little mother" who bore no children of her own, but exerted a maternal influence over hundreds.

As a young woman Alicia Gonzalez had come to Tampa from Cuba with her parents in 1891, staying at the Palmetto Hotel downtown. There she met Dr. Edward Dinius Neve, a native of Denmark who had arrived in Tampa in 1876. He had been involved in a drugstore, watch-making and dentistry.

Boarding with her parents at the downtown hotel, the young woman became a bookkeeper in a men's clothing firm by day and a teacher of Spanish, English and French classes by night.

A courtship developed with Neve, and the couple was married in 1894. They moved into a home at the corner of Tampa and Harrison streets.

Neve must have prospered and accumulated property in the growing community. In 1920, as he and his wife made preparations in New York City for a voyage to Denmark, Neve died of complications from an attack of appendicitis.

Two wills

Shortly before Neve's death, Mrs. Neve's mother, Susan Thorpe Gonzalez, also had died, leaving her estate to her daughter. The will provided that anything remaining after



Brother John Versaggi, who came to the school in 1929, talks with students Nangwaya Kimbrough, center, and Shon Cagle.

In addition, she said the institution could gain the proceeds from the sale of some downtown property for its initial building and expenses.

Mrs. Neve rode the train to New Rochelle to reinforce her offer, and paid travel expenses to Tampa for the Salesian leader to check out the site.

Her generosity brought the Roman Catholic order into Florida for the first time.

After a makeshift altar was erected for a dedication on the property near East Lake, construction began on the first building to house the youths and their religious overseers.

Officially dedicated

Mary Help of Christians School was officially dedicated in October 1928, with Father Alvin Bergamo as superior. Thus, the 60th anniversary is coming a few months late, because of the pressure of other activities last fall.

Among those who remember those early days, when Mary Help of Christians was an orphanage, is Salesian Brother John Versaggi, who came there with two brothers early in 1929.

Their mother died when Brother John was 2 years old, and their fisherman father in St. Augustine had been unable to look after six chil-



Leland Hawes

the daughter's death should go to set up an orphanage and trade school for boys.

As the beneficiary of two estates, Alicia Neve said she asked herself, "Why should the poor boys of Tampa have to wait until I die? I might live to 100."

She pondered an approach to carrying out her mother's wishes.

"I had read the story of the life of Don Bosco," she said, "and decided that the Salesian Order which he founded was the most suitable, because the priests and brothers devote themselves to the welfare of homeless boys."

In a letter written in August 1925, she wrote, making a proposal to the provincial of the Salesians of Don Bosco order at New Rochelle, N.Y.

Mrs. Neve offered a 40-acre tract on a small lake, east of today's East Lake Mall. Included were a 6-acre orange grove, "a good-sized barn, necessary agricultural implements, also two horses."



Priests lead a dedication service, above, before construction started about 1928. At left, the school's first band was formed in 1931.

dren. Brother John, then 11 years old, already had spent some time in an orphanage in New York state.

Mary Help's country setting in the sunshine seemed like "a piece of Heaven" to young Versaggi. Even more important was "the spirit here, the openness, the real family-type spirit."

Although he found need in the orphanage here, "a cheerfulness covered the place," he said. Two priests, two seminarians and a religious brother were assigned to the

school, along with a paid cook.

Versaggi remembers Mrs. Neve as a frequent participant in the school's activities. "She had a motherly affection for the school," he said. She helped fit hand-me-down clothing to youngsters there. "What you got had to be fitted," he explained.

Early recreation was "always on the move — lots of running games," Brother John said. "We had a shed where we could shoot basketball, but we couldn't dribble because of

the sand floor."

Summer activities

Summer activities centered on the lake, although alligators and snakes were hazards. And children could ride a resident pony.

With the Great Depression devastating many families, the number of boys rose steadily from 19 when Versaggi arrived to "about 43" by the time he graduated from the

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Mary Help relies on its own fund-raising

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eighth grade in 1931.

Now there are 125 students — half day-students, half boarders. According to Father Alvin Manni, director of development, the school's "more controlled environment and smaller classes" attract youngsters.

Then as now, Mary Help concentrated its classes from sixth through eighth grades. In the '30s, many of the students could not go on to high school. The need for shop classes to teach trades became evident. Printing, woodworking and automobile mechanics were added to the curriculum in the mid-1930s. Today, "shop" is restricted to printing, while the school looks for part-time instructors in the other trades.

Versaggi left Mary Help for the Salesians of Don Bosco seminary at Newton, N.J.

"I appreciated what I had experienced so much that I wanted to do something for other children, too." He found familiar faces there. Father Alvin Pedrigotti, who had been director at Mary Help of Christians, went to serve at the seminary, also. And Mrs. Neve visited Newton, too.

Mrs. Neve's support of the orphanage extend-

ed further. She founded the Mama Margaret Guild, named for the mother of St. John Bosco and an inter-parish Tampa support group.

In 1938, she took another step that aided young girls. Her tiled home on six acres was turned over to the Salesian Sisters for use as a school. Villa Madonna della Neve began as a school for disadvantaged girls and later became a private school.

Unexpected benefactor

In Mrs. Neve's final years, unable to care for herself, she resided at Villa Madonna, and the sisters looked after her. She died in February 1952 in her 80s.

Mary Help of Christians had another early unexpected benefactor. In the spring of 1932, someone asked boys at the orphanage to pray at the grave of Anna Pitsch in nearby Myrtle Hill Cemetery.

Her husband, Gustav Pitsch, happened to see the youths praying. He was touched by their tribute and told them, "I'll come to see you."

Pitsch visited the school a number of times. After his death in 1935, Mary Help of Christians officials learned the school was a beneficiary of half of Pitsch's estate. The new funds enabled construction of the Anna Pitsch Memorial Build-

ing to house more boys.

Once isolated in its country setting, the school now is jostled by development on all sides as Tampa's urbanization moves eastward.

Some years ago, the fathers spotted builder stakes "less than a stone's throw from our courtyard." Father Manni, then director, quickly began negotiations with the developer.

Mary Help wound up buying 10 acres, then an additional 42 acres, as a buffer.

Conversely, the school sold a less strategic 50 acres of its property to the developers of the Beltz outlet mall. Funds from that sale helped bolster the school's financing.

Originally under the jurisdiction of, and assisted by, the Florida Roman Catholic diocese when it was an orphanage, Mary Help of Christians is now a private institution, dependent upon its own resources.

A foundation has been formed to build an endowment to aid students. About 70 percent of the students now attend on a reduced rate of tuition. But "everyone is treated the same, regardless of background," Father Manni said.

Once a favorite charity when it was "the only orphanage in town," Mary Help of Christians now relies on its own fund-raising for much of its income.