

Margo Young grows up along with Manteca

By Rose Albano Rizzo • ralbanorizzo@mantecabulletin.com • 209-249-3536 • POSTED February 8, 2010 1:43 a.m.



Katherine Laurentzos, right, of Manteca, and Sister Margo Young of the Precious Blood Sisters, catch up on four decades' worth of news after the Wednesday morning mass at St. Anthony of Padua, Calif.

ROSE ALBANO RISSO/The Bulletin

Imagine Manteca so small that everyone knows everybody. So small that the area where St. Anthony of Padua Catholic Church and the houses along that stretch of East North Street is just open fields. And small enough there are only about 5,000 people who call this Spreckels Sugar town home.

Margo Young did not have to imagine any of that. She lived here when Manteca was that small. She remembered the open fields where the Catholic Church now stands. For Sunday services, she and her family worshipped at the old Catholic Church on East Yosemite Avenue across the street from Manteca High where she attended two years of high school. A furniture store - and before that a Kragen automotive store - now occupies the corner lot where the small Catholic house of worship once stood. When the church burned down, a new church was built on East North Street. But not before construction was started on St. Anthony's School where Margo was among the first students to attend the newly built school. There were only four classes to begin with - first to fourth. Margo was in the fourth grade, and was a member of the first eighth-grade class to graduate from Manteca's first and only Catholic campus in 1961.

Like many of the town folks at that time, Margo's father worked at the now-defunct Spreckels Sugar. So it was with mixed nostalgic feelings that she checked in last week at the three-year-old three-story hotel standing in the once agricultural open land dominated by Spreckels' quartet of towering 15-story silos, where her father worked for many years. The plant and its unique olfactory attraction that the Family City was once famous for particularly to motorists driving down Highway 99 is now just a memory, of course. Today, rising from the dust of a million broken pieces of cement from the imploded silos, is a burgeoning commerce center that is now home to a number of high-profile businesses including Staples, Home Depot, Applebee's, Food-4-Less, IHOP and a host of other dining destinations, plus the hotel where Margo stayed during her brief homecoming last week.

Hadn't seen her friend in 45 years

She just finished her sophomore year when she left Manteca to go to boarding school at the Luis del Rey Academy in the Southern California town of Oceanside where she began her formation studies preparatory to entering the convent of the Precious Blood Sisters in Dayton, Ohio. They were the same nuns

who taught at St. Anthony's School for many years when the parish was also served by the priests of the Society of the Precious Blood (CPPS).

When Margo, who is now Sister Margo and a practicing medical doctor, visited St. Anthony's last week to be honored as this year's recipient of the distinguished graduate award in connection with Catholic Schools Week, she had just a few hours' window of opportunity to catch up on 45-years' worth of news about her old hometown. And there were quite a few with whom she was able to share nostalgic and emotional reunions. Among them was Katherine Laurentzos.

"We were neighbors; we grew up together and played together. We haven't seen each other in 45 years!" said a tearful Katherine who exchanged hugs and tears with her former playmate who is now a nun and a doctor, among other things.

When she went to the Wednesday mass where Sister Margo was honored, Katherine was in a sweat shirt outfit with her hair loosely pinned up and looking as though she just came from a morning walk. And indeed she was. She said she was on her daily walk that morning when she stopped for a cup of coffee at a convenience store. Glancing at the stack of newspapers in the store, she saw the story in the Manteca Bulletin about Sister Margo being at church that morning and excitedly came to the morning mass to say hello to her childhood friend and playmate.

Just as excited to see Sister Margo was Mary McCleary whose oldest daughter, Judy, was also an old classmate and playmate of the physician nun.

The Youngs and the McClearys were neighbors in the Sherman Street residential enclave, so the families knew each other. In fact, all of the towns' families knew each other, Sister Margo and Mary said.

'Down to earth' even as a young girl

Mary described Sister Margo as "down to earth" and that "she's always been like that" even as a young girl.

When Sister Margo decided to enter the convent, Mary recalled, "her mother (Martha) didn't really want her to go, but she was proud of her after she went and became a nun."

Mary also said she told Sister Margo, "I knew you would do well, Margo, but I never dreamed you were interested in being a doctor."

I asked the question to Sister Margo during a telephone interview prior to her coming to Manteca last week, and she said she only became interested in pursuing a medical degree later on before she turned 40. Her decision was preceded by lots of prayer with the sisters of her congregation for divine guidance. She is the only medical doctor in her congregation, which also has a member who is a lawyer.

Sister Margo was just as excited to meet the people who still remembered her and her family when they lived in the Sherman Street neighborhood near the Manteca High campus. She remembered spending a lot of time playing with the neighborhood children in the small park where Pine Street dead-ends off Sherman. And like many Manteca oldtimers, she happily recalled those more halcyon days of the once rustic agricultural small town when families knew each other by name.

In fact, everybody knew each other so well that if you were in another part of town and did something you didn't want your parents to know, you could be sure that someone would tell your parents about it, she said with a laugh.