

CELEBRATING 125 YEARS

Nazareth Academy marks 125th anniversary this year

By Nora Dudley || Photography by Cheryl Brown



Nazareth Academy began as an all-girls Catholic school, before opening its doors to male students in 1977.

In 1899, several Sisters of the Congregation of St. Joseph came to La Grange looking to open a Catholic high school for young women.

They found a six-bedroom home located at 120 N. Spring Ave., and it was there that Nazareth Academy began. The school opened its doors in 1900 to 14 students under the direction of Foundress Mother Alexine Gosselin.

Soon, with contributions from the community, Mother Alexine began plans for a new building that accommodated both a school and a convent located on the site where Park Jr. High School currently stands. The facility opened in 1901.

"The Sisters saw the need for faith-based education in La Grange, and responded with the incredible strength, grit and determination needed to get the job done," said Nazareth Academy president Deborah Tracy, a class of 1982 alumna.

Over the next several decades, enrollment increased dramatically, and Nazareth's building at Ogden and Brainard began to feel cramped. The school expanded in 1950, and added a new building that housed an administrative area, auditorium, gymnasium, library, cafeteria, guidance department, science and home economics labs, chapel and classrooms for every department.

Though it was used for extra classrooms for more than a decade, the old building at Brainard was eventually demolished. It was decided that the building on Park Road would be sold and the school relocated completely to the Motherhouse campus on Ogden, where Nazareth now stands.

The 1974-75 school-year marked the beginning of a time in which students would experience a college-like campus, walking between buildings for their classes.

This wasn't the only major change for Nazareth in the 1970s. After years of

deliberation and strategizing, the school opened its doors to male students in 1977—the same year it adopted the Roadrunner as its school mascot.

"Nazareth is the only school in the Archdiocese of Chicago that began as all female and is now co-ed," Tracy said. "The first class had 16 boys. That transition was challenging, but I take my hat off to the Sisters, who integrated boys into the building."

The Sisters of the Congregation of St. Joseph have always been integral to Nazareth. To this day, the Sisters are intertwined with life on campus. For instance, *The Alexine* is the name of the school yearbook, in honor of the foundress, and the school's student section is named the "Freddie Fanatics" in honor of late faculty member Sister Freddie Molitor, who loved sports.

Before 1996, the Sisters of St. Joseph ran Nazareth. They administered, staffed



Nazareth Academy
president Deborah Tracy
is a 1982 graduate.

and managed every detail of the student experience. As time progressed, however, it was decided that Nazareth would become its own corporation independent of the Congregation of St. Joseph, which now sponsors and supports the school, while functioning as its spiritual center.

"On a daily basis, we work to uphold our pillars of scholarship, service, spirit and unity," Tracy said. "The Sisters' philosophy of educating the whole person remains central to a Nazareth Academy education through today."

Tracy, whose mother and daughter also attended Nazareth, graduated from the school in 1982, and returned as a campus minister and religion teacher in 1994. She went on to be the first lay principal, before becoming president seven years ago. Under her leadership, Nazareth has undergone many renovations, from new building wings, walkways and a new facade, to a theater and an updated football stadium.

"I have certainly seen a lot of physical changes to the campus, but our mission has stayed the same for 125 years," Tracy said. "It has been an honor and a privilege to be a

part of the school's history."

In 2014, Nazareth's football team went undefeated, and brought home the school's first IHSA state championship in any sport. This was also the first trip to a state championship game since Nazareth began competing in football in 1978. The school's student-athletes have continued to excel, with football winning state titles in 2014, 2015, 2018, 2022 and 2023, and producing famous alumni in NFL players Julian Love and J.J. McCarthy.

"If you would have told me in 1982 that we were going to be a powerhouse athletic school, I would have laughed," Tracy said. "I am blown away by the athletic success that we have had, but Nazareth is so much more than a place for athletics."

In the 125 years since its founding, Nazareth has been committed to educating young minds and driving real community change. Together, the faculty, staff and community have helped advance its mission. The school offers award-winning faculty and nationally-recognized programs, and it continues to be a leader in academic achievement and student success.

Today, the school attracts students from approximately 60 communities and more than 100 elementary schools, drawing from neighborhoods surrounding Nazareth to as far as Plainfield, Lemont, Palos and Park Ridge.

The school will commemorate its 125th anniversary with several events throughout the year, including service opportunities, a reunion weekend with a mass and a gala at La Grange Country Club in early June. Nazareth will also celebrate 125 alumni who have embodied the mission and made an impact at the school and beyond.

"This will be a celebration of a shared legacy, and will honor all who have gone before us," Tracy said. "I am so proud to have been here all these years, and to have seen Nazareth grow and flourish with the mission at our core. I was here when we celebrated our 100th anniversary, and I am here to celebrate the 125th.—I love it here." ■

To learn more about how Nazareth Academy will celebrate its 125th anniversary, visit www.nazarethacademy.com.