

Neighbors

Church turns 145 – thanks to its

Rev. James Trainor's hard work saved St. Mary's from ruin

By CAROL CHILD
Special to The News Journal

WILMINGTON — St. Mary's Roman Catholic Church at Sixth and Pine celebrated its 145th anniversary on Nov. 2. But, were it not for the Rev. James F. Trainor, who came to the parish 28 years ago, the church might not be there at all.

Trainor resurrected the crumbling, second-oldest church in the city (St. Mary's-St. Patrick's Roman Catholic Church form a combined parish) consecrated in 1858 by St. John Neumann, bishop of Philadelphia, and restored a disintegrating parish.

On June 6, this man who was not adverse to wielding hammer and saw underwent triple-bypass heart surgery. He came through just fine until two days later, when what the medical profession terms "an incident," deprived him of oxygen," said Bill Kooser, president of St. Patrick's Center. Since then he has remained comatose, cared for at the Little Sisters of the Poor Nursing Home near Christiana.

"They were going to condemn the church and tear it down," said Pat Zickgraf of Wilmington, associated with the church since childhood, and now the cook. "But they did research and discovered how old it was. That's when the church was put on the National Register of Historic Places."

"Through Father Trainor's leadership," said Kooser, "he gathered a group of parishioners and interested people to work — painting, repairing broken windows. He worked right alongside, fixing toilets, whatever."

"The rectory building had to be torn down," said Kooser. "The condition was so deplorable. The neat thing is he turned it into a memorial garden — in the footprint of the rectory. There are garden walls, gates and hundreds of plaques hung on the outside back wall of the church commemorating those whom parishioners desire to be remembered."



The News Journal/WILLIAM BRETZGER

After St. Mary's rectory was demolished, the Rev. James F. Trainor turned the site into a memorial garden, complete with a statue he produced using an existing statue to make a mold.

"Father Trainor did wonders," said Zickgraf. He went from a carpenter to a priest. He didn't just stand by and watch. He did the work himself. He climbed the roof and everything. He worked with people from all walks of life. He worked with the poorest and the wealthiest. Now you sit and hold his hand and you don't know whether he knows you're there or not. He really touched a lot of people."

"His spirit was contagious," said Kooser. "You wanted to participate. If you couldn't do some things, he found things you could do. He said, 'Follow and do what I'm doing.' He never asked you to do what he wouldn't do. He left nobody out."

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sive of everybody. His whole life was that way. He included everybody in the community. He wanted everybody to be a part of St. Mary's-St. Patrick's. It was his intent: He was always there with a hand out, not turning anybody away."

"He was a people person," Kooser went on. "He was brought up in a litter. He wanted people around. He didn't want to eat alone. He invited people to his table. He made sure the door was open, that you were included."

"He had a reputation as an exceptional counselor. He remarried couples who had divorced. He would sit and talk to people for hours. He spent many evenings, talking, holding their hands, resolving problems, even



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FAMILY: Parents: Thomas J. Trainor, policeman (deceased) and Louise A. Trainor (deceased); brothers: Jack (deceased), Tom, Bill and Raymond; sister: Marguerite (deceased).

POSITION: Pastor, St. Mary's-St. Patrick's Roman Catholic churches since 1975.

EXPERIENCE: Associate pastor, St. Thomas the Apostle, Wilmington, 1970-75; St. Mary Refuge of Sinners, Cambridge, Md., 1969-70; St. John the Beloved, Milltown, 1966-69; Holy Spirit, New Castle, 1964-66.

HONORS: Served as chaplain of the U.S. Senate, Jan. 25, 2001, at the invitation of U.S. Sen. Joe

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Kooser, of Penny Hill, has been a St. Mary's-St. Patrick's parishioner since the day 20 years ago when his wife attended St. Mary's on a holy day of obligation, because the church was near her workplace. She came home, said, "I've found this great guy. He's really got something to say. He's not preachy, intellectual."

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PROFILE



The News Journal/JENNIFER CORBETT

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Biden, D-Del. Envisioned and hosted the St. Patrick's Day Society's Annual Communion Breakfast, a fund-raising event celebrating fellowship and Irish culture while benefiting local citizens, since 1994.

EDUCATION: St. Mary's Seminary, Baltimore, completion of seminary training; St. Mary College, St. Mary, Ky. (seminary training); St. Joseph's College, Philadelphia; St. Charles Borromeo Seminary, Philadelphia; graduate of Roman Catholic High School, Philadelphia. Ordained May 16, 1964, at St. Peter's Cathedral in Wilmington.

INTERESTS: Gardening, traveling – always in a group. Until illness, tended his mother's garden at her Penny Hill home.

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'Father Jim' or just 'Jim.'"

Since 1975, Trainor has been the only priest of both churches. In Trainor's absence the Rev. David Murphy has been brought in full time as the administrator, responsible for the Masses.

"I visit Father Trainor twice a week," said Kooser. "The sisters get him up and dressed, in a shirt and khakis. He turns and faces your direction. But no one knows if he is aware. Except for this, he is perfectly healthy – his lungs, his kidneys, everything."

Trainor turned 69 on Wednesday.