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Sr. Mary James Geenen and Her Program

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DAYTON, Ohio, July 21, 1972 --- A relevance to the community through education can often be a long, hard and frustrating journey for today's teacher in a transitional world. But Sr. Mary James Geenen of St. Mary's School, Kaukauna, Wisconsin, hasn't found that to be so in the past year.

A candidate for a master of science degree in elementary education at the University of Dayton, Sister Mary James developed a program last August which was designed to "kill two birds with one stone". A member of the Franciscan Sisters, Manitowoc, Wisconsin, who will receive her degree this Saturday, July 29, Sister developed the program which: 1, gave her a practicum project for the master's degree, and 2, opened up a year of educational activity for the sixth grade pupils of St. Mary's School in Kaukauna.

The program was approved by Dr. John O'Donnell, chairman, UD's Department of School Administration, and Dr. Simon Chavez, chairman, Department of Elementary Education.

Stated briefly, the program, which was entitled "Use of Community Resources", enabled the students to better know and understand the community and environment in which they lived. It was accomplished through outside lecturers, magazines, newspapers, photography, field trips, evaluation of activities by students and evaluation by parents concerning their children's interest in the program.

By all criteria, Sister Mary James touched home base on all counts. She had the cooperation of, not only the parents, but government and chamber of commerce officials, professional and business men and women, her superiors, the parents and, most of all, the students.

It was a project of the people, by the people and for the people. It enabled 11 and 12 year old children to trace the history of their community, learn about its early settlers, the relationship of the communities in the Fox River Valley, develop a kindred spirit for the present-day surroundings which, to the children, is Kaukauna, Wisconsin, and, most important, something about themselves -- body, mind, spirit and talent.

The year-long effort accomplished many goals. It developed an awareness of community resources and how they can be used in the curriculum for effective teaching. The community became a laboratory in which pupils learn through first-hand experience and observation, and educational objectives were met, communication skills were developed, and a vocational overview was rendered.

People in the community obtained a better understanding of the school, its objectives, methods and problems. The teachers gained insight and appreciation of local industry and the functioning of the economy. And lastly, cooperative relationships are fostered, developing a motivation toward involvement in community and school affairs.

Sister Mary did not skirt the issues of the day involving youth. In the 21 activities listed for the year, the program included participation in the Drug Alert Day as conducted by the Drug Council Inc. of Outagamie County and sponsored by the Northside-Appleton Kiwanis Club, and the Fox River Valley Shoplifting Prevention Program as explained by officials of J.C. Penney and Company.

Besides the local historical subjects and trips, the program included the life, culture and habits of people in Russia, Mexico, Greenland, and Peru as seen through the eyes of people who have a connection in Kaukauna. There, too, were projects on public health, the public library, your body, your eyes, soil conservation, public communications, farming, shopping habits and techniques, the operation of local businesses and religion.

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During the nine-month period, the children touched on such academic subjects as history, economics, law, sociology, psychology, geography, law enforcement, religion, language, fine arts, mathematics, penmanship, spelling, English, music, communications and agriculture.

But most important, the children had to learn how to articulate orally and through the written word. They did this by becoming involved in the discussion sessions and by writing an evaluation of each activity.

As for Sister Mary James, it solidified her opinion as a teacher that it is important to have more than one person instilling knowledge into young people over a year's educational experience and that "kids" learn more when they are "in" something. They are more alert.

She hopes to continue the program. The University of Dayton will make it a part of the learning experience for future teachers.