

BOOK REVIEWS

Thomas W. Hoag. *Nothing but the Best: The Story of DePaul School for Hearing and Speech 1908-2008.* (Pittsburgh: DePaul School for Hearing and Speech, 2007), 101 pp., illus., addenda, bibliography, with DVD [available at DePaul School for Hearing and Research, 6202 Alder Street, Pittsburgh, PA 15206 — \$33 hardcover/\$18 softcover]

As the City of Pittsburgh prepares to celebrate the 250th anniversary of its establishment, the community also prepares to recognize 100 years of service of an institution unique to the city and the Diocese of Pittsburgh — DePaul School for Hearing and Research. The rich history of DePaul has been recounted in this newly published book by one of its long-time teachers, Thomas Hoag. Two years of research and writing resulted in a fact-packed, picture-filled history of an undertaking begun in 1908 by the then-bishop of Pittsburgh, legendary J.F. Regis Canevin, to “preserve the Catholic faith for the deaf in the coming generations.” Given the increasing number of diagnosed deaf children, the bishop recognized the need to meet both their educational and religious needs.

Operating initially in a leased mansion in the Troy Hill section of the city’s North Side, the Sisters of Charity from Greensburg, Pennsylvania — who trace their origin to the first American congregation of women religious founded by St. Elizabeth Seton in 1809 — greeted the sole student who entered the newly-opened school on September 7, 1908.

Hoag provides context, avoiding the standard recital of dry institutional history. The educational challenges

confronting the teachers in that early time period are candidly presented, while the long-standing social stigma confronting children perceived as “different” is not ignored. The Sisters adopted the “oral approach” (now denominated as “auditory/oral”) in which students learn to use whatever hearing they have in combination with lip and speech reading in order to understand and use spoken language. The goal: development of language skills that permit mainstreaming of the child. This approach would utilize small classes, coupled with individualized instruction.

The author explains both the “why” and the “how” for such an educational venture: filthy living and working conditions that attended the city’s steel-making and heavy manufacturing resulted in diseases that caused deafness, and the Sisters concluded that the objective of functional independence in the adult world — rather than life-long institutionalization — was achievable through the “oral” method.

The book traces the school’s history as changes in name, location, and use occurred. The Pittsburgh School for the Deaf — incorporated in 1910 as The DePaul Institute for Deaf Mutes — ultimately became known to many simply as “DePaul.” The school moved in 1911 to the Brookline section of the city, and subsequently relocated to Shadyside in 2002. There was also a transformation from semi-residential facility to day school, with a variety of outreach programs. From 1949 to 1970, DePaul’s mission was enlarged to include blind and partially-sighted children.

Relying on dozens of interviews with former students and teachers, and thirty years of personal involvement as a teacher at DePaul, the author weaves a narrative that is accompanied by hundreds of photos — many in reduced size to paint a large picture of the daily life of the students and teachers, their educational instruction, their other activities, and the persons they encountered during their years at DePaul. Sports, band, dance, dramatic presentations, and the arts are depicted. Any reader with even a minimal sense of Pittsburgh history will recognize and appreciate the photographs of sports figures, clergy and others who were a part of the children's world at DePaul.

The teacher in Hoag is best evidenced in his successful effort to depict, in the narrative, the spirit that motivated the educators, Bishop Canevin, and the school's first superintendent, the visionary Fr. Thomas Coakley. Initiation of an annual Sunday collection in diocesan churches for DePaul's benefit clearly increased the profile of the school and filled a financial void occasioned by the state's pullback from funding "sectarian" institutions in the 1920s. The historian in Hoag is best evidenced in two sections of the book: (1) a candid analysis of the impact of a resumed financial relationship with the state in 1973, and the attendant secularization challenge, and (2) the reasons for the controversial "move" from the scenic Brookline campus to the former Sacred Heart High School building in Shadyside. These and other sections of the book illustrate the author's

willingness to present an unvarnished look at the society in which DePaul flourishes, which makes the achieved results even more noteworthy in light of societal and personal challenges. The irony in the controversial move to Shadyside lies in the fact that Fr. Coakley, first superintendent of and builder of the Brookline campus, left there to become builder of the massive Sacred Heart Church/School complex to which DePaul relocated. A visionary indeed!

The enormous personal investment by administrators, teachers, volunteers and supporters to enable hearing/ speaking-impaired children to realize their fullest potential and transition them into a hearing and speaking world comes through clearly in this history. The community has been enriched by the thousands of graduates from this school. Pittsburgh's history is likewise enriched by Thomas Hoag's wonderful account of DePaul's history. We are indebted to him and the school for bringing this work to publication.

— *John C. Bates*

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