



Lifelong Learner

Middle and Lower School Counselor
Jeanne Doyle

Mentors not just for school, but for life

When I moved back to Minnesota after earning my master's degree from Fordham University in New York City, I had four years of experience as an educator under my belt. I had been a librarian at a Jesuit boys' high school in Jersey City, and a counselor at a coed Catholic high school in Manhattan. I had fallen in love with the magical experience of listening to the stories of my students and reflecting back the beauty and importance of their individual journeys.

When my own travels brought me back to the Midwest, I knew I wanted to stay in schools, and I was confident and eager to work. I called every Catholic school in the Twin Cities, brazenly offering to teach English, history or religion, or to work as a librarian or counselor. It was already mid-September, but one principal called me back. That was Margaret MacNeill, Visitation's Upper School Director at the time.

"I don't have any openings in the areas you mentioned, but I always need more substitute teachers," she said, in the friendly, melodious voice I would come to love. "Would you be interested in that?"

"Yes!" I said.



That was almost twenty years ago. Margie was the first of many women and men in our community who would become mentors for me: as an educator, a colleague, a parent, a friend, a good citizen and a woman of faith. Margie welcomed me with joyful optimism, tutored me as a professional with patience and honesty, and was always encouraging and grateful. She embodied Gentle Strength, one of the little virtues of Salesian Spirituality, and I learned from her every day. The relationship she and I developed was one of mutual respect and unconditional positive regard. Margie challenged me to be the best counselor and educator I can be, and gave me the encouragement and freedom I needed to do that. She taught me and modeled lessons for me that I use not just for work but in all aspects of my life.

"When one teaches, two learn" – Robert Heinlein

After counseling Upper School girls for eleven years, I took a leave to study at the University of Minnesota, expanding my counseling licensure to include all grades: K-12. While on leave, Dawn Nichols, who was then the Head of School, asked me if I would move to the Lower and Middle School Counseling position. Once again, I said, "Yes!" I was excited to take on a new challenge and was full of ideas for helping students find the inner compass and voice inside them.

I immediately commenced teaching social emotional skills in the Lower School. But when I first began teaching in the classrooms, I was out of my comfort zone and nervous. I spoke the words but didn't own the lessons. Yet as I taught six classes a week about recognizing feelings in others and in ourselves, about managing strong emotions, I realized I was learning so much. I was learning not just from the lessons but from the children as they practiced the skills. We would "smell the soup, cool the soup" as we practiced deep belly-breathing to calm our bodies down. We learned that movement and laughter really do make your whole body feel better, and teaching students to harness their thoughts in order to master their bodies taught me to practice mastery of self as well.

Left: Lower and Middle School Counselor Jeanne Doyle with her Upper School colleague Anne Gimpl.

Saying “Yes!” to all-girls

I continue to grow and change in my career all the time. Part of our commitment as educators is to stay abreast of the latest research in brain development and educational practices so that we continue to offer our students the best opportunities to learn. I love that we get to keep learning. In addition to ongoing professional development, I learn from my colleagues, from parents and from my students every day.

This year, we started a new schedule, which opened avenues for connecting with the students that weren't there before. Next year, as we embark on an all-girls Middle School, I am excited to say “Yes!” to more such opportunities to connect and teach and learn with our students.

While I will miss the sweet energy the boys have always brought to our Middle School, I am eager to take advantage of the single-gender setting. The middle school years are awkward enough with the onset of puberty and all of the changes that come with that: growth spurts, hormonal

changes, unexpected mood swings and a growing desire to be independent, to name a few. The desire to belong is so strong at this time as well, just when students are figuring out who they are, who they want to be and who they want as friends. I have always felt that girls in a single-gender school setting during adolescence have a leg up on their peers in coed schools, because they can go through these biological changes without the added pressure they might feel with boys in the room. With perceived or societal pressure to look a certain way or behave a certain way in front of the opposite sex, it is often more difficult to “be who you are and be that perfectly well.”

To our girls-becoming-women, I can bring my life experience of taking risks, searching for the right fit and opening myself to new experiences, and combine it with all the practical counseling wisdom I have learned from my years at Visitation. I will not forget the chance Margie MacNeill took with me, nor the loving mentorship she gave me in my early years at Visitation. Perhaps I can be that model or mentor for my students as we all learn and grow together.



Visitation now offers an all-girls education starting in grade 6!

The Visitation School's all-girls Middle School provides an excellent transition period for young women as they develop new responsibilities and gain the confidence to take on new challenges.

Join us for an Admissions Morning on May 5, at 9:30 a.m.