

'The best teacher I ever had'

Student who integrated Catholic schools says faith in Jesus guided her through tumultuous time



With two of her grandchildren by her side, Carole Finnell stands near a portrait of Cardinal Joseph E. Ritter, the man who changed her life and the course of Catholic education in the archdiocese by ordering the integration of Catholic schools in the late 1930s and early 1940s. She poses here in the library at Cardinal Ritter Jr./Sr. High School in Indianapolis with Brooke and Andrew Finnell, both students at the school. (Photo by John Shaughnessy)

By John Shaughnessy

The story's defining moment occurs when a little girl finds herself locked inside a school cloakroom, afraid of what will happen next.

It's also a story about the unflinching dream of a bishop, a deep belief in angels, and the growing faith of a child during a contentious, history-making period for the Archdiocese of Indianapolis—and the United States.

As the person who lived that story, 78-year-old Carole Finnell warns that it has its share of dark, troubling moments that people may not want to hear about or read.

Still, it's her honest view of everything she faced and endured back then—back when she was an 8-year-old student entering a new school for her, an elementary school that was part of Bishop Joseph E. Ritter's plan to integrate the Catholic schools in the archdiocese in the late 1930s and early 1940s.

An emotionally-charged time of change

Finnell's story of heartbreak, hope and faith has its roots in 1937, 17 years before *Brown v. Board of Education*, the landmark 1954 U.S. Supreme Court decision which held that racial segregation of children in public schools was unconstitutional.

In 1937, Bishop Ritter contacted Father Bernard Strange of [St. Rita Parish](#) in Indianapolis—then a predominantly black parish—and shared his desire to have children from the parish attend a Catholic high school, according to information in the archives of the archdiocese.

On the first day of school in 1937, five black girls arrived at St. John Academy in Indianapolis and were welcomed by the Sisters of Providence who taught there—a welcome that wasn't universally shared.

"After the girls left school on registration day, I sat at the telephone all afternoon and evening to receive a succession of calls of protest," wrote Providence Sister Mary Joan Kirchner in recalling her time as principal of St. John Academy when the integration occurred.

"Not one person identified himself or herself. I refused to discuss the matter on the phone, but told each caller that if he/she would come to the academy, I would be glad to explain the whole matter. No one accepted my invitation."

Protests came from other directions, too.

"One pastor came to me several weeks after the opening of school and criticized me for taking black girls," Sister Mary Joan wrote, adding that the pastor told her that "no one would want to come" from his parish to the school. "I told him that I believed God was more powerful than the people of Indianapolis and that I trusted Him to take care of St. John's.

"While parents and some alumnae objected to the integration, most of the students were most cooperative and life moved smoothly during the remainder of the year. The following spring or summer, Bishop Ritter informed the other two academies that they must accept black girls."

Sister Mary Joan noted that she and her fellow Providence teachers at the school "did a lot of praying" about what would happen with enrollment in 1938. Their prayers were answered.

"In the fall of 1938, we had 85 freshmen, the largest freshmen class in the city!" she noted. "In 1937, the class numbered in the forties, including the five black girls."

In the midst of this emotionally-charged atmosphere, Bishop Ritter continued his integration efforts in Catholic schools—efforts that led the Klu Klux Klan to protest outside SS. Peter and Paul Cathedral in Indianapolis.

During that time, 8-year-old Carole Finnell (then Ferguson) and her older brother Ronald were thrust into the center of the storm.

Hardness of hearts, hope in humanity

Finnell started her education at St. Rita School, part of a parish whose mission was to evangelize the black community. As part of that mission, a bus traveled through the

city to bring children to the all-black school at St. Rita's. Finnell and her brother rode that bus.

"I loved my first-grade teacher, Sister Mary Carmel, and whatever she said was golden to me," Finnell recalls. "Sister continued as my teacher in second grade, and she continued to be wonderful in my opinion. I felt valued and loved in her classroom. I had no hint of what was to come."

As Finnell prepared for third grade, she and her brother became central figures in Bishop Ritter's decision to integrate Catholic elementary schools. Under the bishop's direction, Father Strange chose the two children to attend an all-white school, and their mother agreed.

Her third-grade year became an education in more ways than usual for her. She learned the hardness of hearts of some people who couldn't look beyond the color of a person's skin. She also learned about the humanity of people from those who befriended her. Most of all, she learned that she could always trust in God. But all of those lessons were hard-earned.

"My teacher disliked me from the day she set eyes on me," she recalls. "She was an elderly nun who had taught at the school for years."

When Finnell struggled in math early in the year, her teacher said she was going to demote her. Finnell says her teacher also told her classmates not to play with her at recess.

"I was only lonely for a short time because Judy and Ruth ignored her orders and befriended me," she recalls.

As the year continued and "sister found more ways to show her displeasure with me," Finnell longed for the feeling of value and love she experienced with Sister Mary Carmel. It came in a moment that still sears her mind and her heart.

'I prayed as hard as I knew how'

"Our third-grade class went to Mass each morning before class," she recalls. "The church was located near our classroom. The cloakroom was in the back of the classroom, and while I was hanging up my coat, Sister marched the class out and shut the door.

"I tried to open it. Upon realizing it was locked, I was filled with fear for I knew that when she returned, I would be in for another one of her painful, degrading punishments. I knelt by the door and cried out to Jesus. I prayed as hard as I knew how, asking Jesus to save me. I heard a soft rustle near the door and a click. I turned the knob, and the door opened.

"Looking up and down the hall, I saw no one. All was quiet and still. I was sure that Jesus had sent an angel to release me. I ran to Mass. My teacher never mentioned anything about my tardy arrival."

More trials awaited her, including an incident when a member of the parish showed up at the school and told her and her brother that he was picking them up at their mother's request. Finnell recalls how the man drove them around in his car as he threatened them and told them they shouldn't return to the school. In response, Bishop Ritter made his own threat—to close the school and the parish.

"In physique, he was a man of small stature, but he was big in heart," Finnell says about then-Bishop Ritter. "He was determined to integrate the Catholic schools. When there was trouble, he threatened to close down the school and the church. People were nice to us then."

Finnell says that some parishioners rallied around her, her brother and their mother. As the crisis eventually faded, she and her brother finished the year at the school.

In the years that followed, the faith of Ronald and Carole endured and grew stronger. He became a Jesuit priest, serving the Catholic faith until his death in 2002. She has shared her faith with her five children, her seven grandchildren and her three great-grandchildren.

In a nice, fitting touch, her granddaughter Alexis Finnell was the valedictorian of the Class of 2014 at [Cardinal Ritter Jr./Sr. High School](#) in Indianapolis. Her grandson, Andrew Finnell, and her granddaughter, Brooke Finnell, both attend the archdiocesan school named for the man who changed the course of Catholic education in the archdiocese.

"She's the matriarch of the family. She holds everything together," Andrew says about his grandmother. "She's been a great influence on me."

Brooke nods and adds, "She's always been present in my life. She's always proud of you no matter what you do. She finds something positive even in a negative situation."

That quality shines through as the longtime member of [St. Thomas Aquinas Parish](#) in Indianapolis recalls the education that she and her brother received as they were part of history in the archdiocese.

"My brother finished with straight A's," she says. "And I finished with straight J's—Jesus, Jesus, Jesus, Jesus, Jesus. He was the best teacher I ever had."

"Jesus taught me that he is faithful, and I can trust him. He taught me that when you or someone else does something wrong, you won't get away with it. He taught me to forgive my trespassers as he forgives me."

"I learned that I can be strong and endure difficulty. I learned to pray, and I learned that he can open doors that appear impenetrable. The lessons learned that year have sustained me throughout life."

That experience has also led to another lasting belief about Jesus for Finnell.

"I still believe his angel freed me from that classroom." †