



Elizabeth man works to re-create school, church community he knew as a child

By Katherine Santiago/The Star-Ledger

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Joseph Caporaso — also known as “Joe Cap” and “Deacon Joe” — grew up on the edge of a tough Elizabeth neighborhood. Peterstown, or The Berg. He was bookish and shy, a boy who lost his mother when he was two, and recalls he had a downstairs neighbor, an older kid who grew up to be a city cop, who protected him from bad guys.

The Berg was thought a rough place mostly by people uptown — the lawyers and doctors and business owners who then lived in the Elmora section, where Caporaso would eventually become principal of Elizabeth’s PS 12, known by neighbors simply as the Elmora School, as if it were private.



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Deacon Joseph Caporaso, the principal at Our Lady of Guadalupe Academy in Elizabeth, where the Catholic elementary schools have dropped down to only three, including its newest, Our Lady of Guadalupe, which replaces an old Italian Catholic school.

But The Berg really wasn’t so tough. Although one mobster — identified as a family member by the FBI — ran gambling out of a local playground, it was a solid Italian enclave, a safe place where you knew everybody’s business, shared parental intelligence on what the kids were doing and gathered in August for St. Rocco’s Festival.

A community — and at the center of that community was a church and a school. St. Anthony’s.

“I still think of it as a community,” says Caporaso who, at 61, has returned to The Berg to work blocks from his

old home. "I still love walking the streets, eating in the local restaurants. It's safe here at night. You don't have to be afraid."

St. Anthony's the church is still there at the corner of Centre Street and Third Avenue. But the school where Caporaso graduated is gone. Well, maybe not gone, but changed. It is now Our Lady of Guadalupe Academy, a merger of St. Anthony's with two other Elizabeth schools, Blessed Sacrament and St. Mary's.

This leaves Elizabeth, once with 15 Catholic elementary schools, with just two. The other is St. Genevieve's in Elmora, the last of the city's true parish schools. Caporaso is an ordained deacon at both St. Genevieve's and St. Anthony's churches — and now he is the principal of Our Lady of Guadalupe.

"I know it sounds strange, but I think I am alive just so I could be here," says Caporaso. Seven years ago, when he retired after 30 years in the public schools — 23 as a principal — he contracted lymphoma.

"I never thought I'd make it but, once I did and I heard about this job opening up, I thought maybe that was the reason I survived," says Caporaso, who spends his vacations working at a Trappist monastery in the Berkshires.

The designation of the merged school as an "academy" is an effort by the Newark Archdiocese to increase resources for its few remaining schools to make them attractive to parents. All teachers must be fully certified. Foreign languages and computers are taught. They have science labs. And a lay advisory board must monitor their operations.

"I am passionate about Catholic schools, especially in the inner cities," says Lorraine Cunningham of Westfield, head of the academy's advisory board. "They teach the ethical values every child needs."

Still, Catholic schools close because enrollments fall — and they fall at a time when alternatives to public schools are sought by inner-city residents.

"It's a matter of money," says Cunningham, who once led the archdiocese's inner-city scholarship fund. "If Catholic schools were free, they would be packed."

Tuition at Our Lady of Guadalupe is \$3,500 a year and, while 80 percent receive financial aid, it's a lot of money in a neighborhood now made up mostly of poor and working-class Latin-American and Caribbean immigrant families.

Caporaso's staff is trying to create — maybe re-create — the community his old school represented when he was a child, the sanctuary he knew. But it isn't easy.

"I wasn't happy when they closed my daughter's school," says Donna Holmes, head of the new school's home-school association. Her daughter Madison attended St. Mary's until it closed. She admits now she is happy with what Caporaso has done — "I wish I wasn't so happy because I still miss St. Mary's."

Along with teachers, the academy has specialists who try to make the school a neighborhood center, a community. One is Sr. Marion Scranton, a health specialist at nearby Trinitas Hospital who runs a program called "*madre a madre*" — mother to mother — to help young parents deal with raising children.

"We are trying to make it a place where parents as well as children learn and take responsibility for their own lives," says the nun.

Cunningham believes the school will survive. That, eventually, the few remaining Catholic schools will attract



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Sister Rosemary Kenny's second-grade class at Our Lady of Guadalupe Academy in Elizabeth.

enough students to be viable. "We have momentum," she says.

Caporaso thinks of the future, too. The school's, and his. He remembers that, when he came back to take over the place a few months ago, he thought of his cancer and he thought of his childhood. He looked up at the stained-glass windows at the front doorway and said to himself:

"I never thought I'd see them again."

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