

Blind River honours sister's 50 years of service

By SHANNON QUESNEL, THE STANDARD



It was a love of Sister Bernadette Paquette that drove people to the Blind River Royal Canadian Legion Hall Branch 189 on Friday night.

The event was held to honour Paquette's 50 years of service with the Catholic Church, the order of the Daughters of Wisdom and her work in many of the various postings she has held across the province.

About 175 people attended, children and adults, and when they weren't giving Paquette hugs there were satisfying their appetites with spaghetti. Tickets were \$10 and the proceeds will go towards charitable missions in the Philippines.

The organizers arranged this to give Paquette admirers a chance to thank her for all the work she has done.

One admirer was Denise Racine who says the sister has done a lot of good.

Monique Potvin agrees.

"She has a heart as big as the world. She can never do enough," says Potvin.

"She likes to be involved in a lot of things," adds Racine. "She likes to be in charge of a lot of things."

Another person said Paquette once provided a place for her to stay when she was teaching music in Blind River. The sister had an extra room set up at the rectory.

Sister Dianne Bottos, of the Sisters of St. Joseph, remembers Paquette as far back as 30 years ago.

"She was leaving Blind River to go to Wawa. She knew the sisters here and I had just come to town.

"We've always got along very well with them."

Lucienne Vemair has known Paquette for even longer, since 1952. The sister used to babysit her children for \$3.

She remembers Paquette taking the \$3 and putting it down on a dress for layaway.

"She thought that was something. We have been close ever since. She is a very kind person, very generous and very knowledgeable."

Whenever this reporter stopped to talk to someone about Paquette it was always a glowing review.

"She spends her weeks visiting with families, meeting with people, dealing with good news and bad news. She's being doing that now for more than 15 years." Blown away

"I just find it is overwhelming," says Paquette, of the response she saw on Friday night.

"I really find it's not only a celebration for me, but also for everyone else. I don't know if they came for me or the spaghetti, but maybe it's a combination of the two."

"I'm full of life."

Originally from Sturgeon Falls, Paquette, when she was only eight years old, realized what she wanted.

"I somewhat knew in my heart this is what I wanted to be."

It was not until Grade 12 she dropped a bombshell on her parents.

"I left home when I was 17 and a half. That was very hard to do as I was the oldest one in the family."

Her parents had mixed reactions.

"I remember coming home from boarding school in Sturgeon Falls. I told them I had something to tell."

She told them separately.

"My dad came first in the bedroom. I told him and he started to cry, but he was happy. And then he left the room and my mom came in and I told her."

"She was happy with it, but she didn't show too much emotion at the time."

That changed when she realized her eldest would become a sister first and then a teacher, and not the other way around. This meant Paquette would be leaving home sooner rather than later.

After taking her vows and teacher's training she started working with students in Ottawa, then Espanola, Blind River, Dubreuilville and then Timmins," she says, where she served at a parish.

Then she returned to Blind River and has been there for 16 years, mostly as a parish administrator.

"We don't have a residing priest and so I do everything," she says, with a few exceptions.

Over the span of 50 years, there have been only a few times Paquette has questioned her vocation.

"Religious life is like every other life. Ups and downs, trials, frustrations, anger, joy, presence of God and presence of others in one's life. We are like everybody else."

It was only early in her career she thought of leaving the order, but something compelled her to stay.

"As much as I wanted to leave, there was something, a steadfast feeling. It felt like someone was holding my hand, so tightly, and I couldn't leave. And I stayed."

Many sisters have left the service, but she felt she could not.

"And I was happy throughout."

Recently, someone asked her that if she could do it all again, would she?

"I could not answer today what I answered 50 years ago. The only thing I could say today is I am happy and content to be where I am right this moment."