

Regina (Genie) Arena Smith

Years Attended: (Kindergarten through 9th grade) 1955-1964

Occupation: Clinical Social Worker, Duke University

Born and raised in Durham, Ms. Smith is one of seven children born to a mother from the mountains of NC who came to Durham to attend Watts nursing school and converted to Catholicism through the assistance of Fr. Resaiker of Holy Cross parish. Her father, Jay Arena, was a Catholic who hailed from West Virginia and was the first graduate of Duke Medical School. Notably, he was a pediatrician who founded the national network of poison control centers. (You can hear an interview with Ms. Smith's father at http://digitaldukemed.mc.duke.edu/pcc/arena_lye.html). Ms. Smith's older siblings attended Immaculata when it was known as St. Williams. Uniforms were introduced in 1964 and the nuns dressed in full habits during her time at Immaculata.

I asked Ms. Smith what memories came to mind as she thought about her time at Immaculata:

"My earliest recollections are of kindergarten. It was a smaller building, one floor only...small and kind of by itself. I spent every other year in school with my sister. It was run by the Dominicans and priests came in and taught religion. There were only 15 or 20 of us and most went from K-9 together. Occasionally I see classmates around where I grew up."

"I have fond memories of Sr. Cecile who taught 1st and 2nd grade. She was very kind, had a sweet voice and would squat down to talk to you...very kind. Sr. Mary Michelle taught the older kids and was very good at listening. She'd say, 'Why do you feel that way? What do you think God would say about that?' It was just a conversation. ...We sang the Litany of the Saints at mass. I remember being in choir robes on the stone floor singing in Latin."

Ms. Smith also recalled the crownings of Mary :

"We'd weave roses together and sing Mary We Crown Thee with Roses Today."

On recess:

"For my era, recess was in the little parking area behind Emily K. We'd play dodgeball, hopscotch, jacks. We would line up at noon and kneel down and say the Angelis."

I asked Ms. Smith about her experiences as a Catholic in a predominantly non-Catholic part of the country:

"Kids in the neighborhood might make negative remarks about praying the idols having to do with the saints. In the 1950's, the Ku Klux Klan was still pretty active here and they would come after us (Catholics). It was a time when you kept what you believed to yourself. You felt safe within your group. ...(Catholic mass) was in a different language, you used incense and no one else used that. It was understandable (that others felt we were different) and there wasn't a huge feeling of not belonging. We had tight-knit Catholic friends. No one said anything to us (explicitly), but you figured it out. You read the paper, heard people talk on the bus."

On her own experiences of a Catholic education:

"For me, English was...anything that involved words was great, but tied into all of it was faith. You could be talking about a science experiment and see how it works but isn't this an amazing miracle. I thought it was kind of a neat way to learn things."

"Immaculata was a stepping stone of my faith. I went to Jordan and then to Sacred Heart College (1967-1969). I worked in public clinics, went back and did my undergrad at Sacred Heart and graduate work at UNC-Chapel Hill. I had that big period of questioning, but there's something really comforting (going to Catholic school) where you didn't have to explain everything—I enjoyed the small community."

“I’m a social worker. I work with people who need a hand, support. I don’t think social work would have appealed to me as much (without a Catholic education). I think looking at the world in a way where you see each other as your brother or your sister lends itself very well to what I do for a living. I have no difficulty looking at people I work with as “me.”

Finally, I asked Ms. Smith if she had any words to share with the ICS graduating class of 2010:

“Keep all of this really close because eventually it’s going to make absolute sense to you. There’s something about learning how to think and believing that everyone, we are all the same. You get to carry that with you and that’s a pretty good thing.”