

## Lopez alumni look back, ahead as 50th year begins.

By **LINDA TRIMBLE** -Education Writer for the Daytona Beach News-Journal

DAYTONA BEACH -- The crisply starched black-and-white nuns' habits were nowhere to be seen. Neither were the detested green beanies Ann Sweeney Drago remembers Father Lopez Catholic High School students wearing 50 years ago. The nuns and priests who made up most of the teaching staff then have been replaced by lay instructors. And Father Lopez students now were wearing green or white polo shirts and khaki shorts or slacks -- without hats -- as they scurried past Drago and a handful of her classmates Monday morning to begin a new school year.

It was a day for looking ahead to a future marked by a growing student population and looking back to another milestone in Father Lopez history -- the 1959 opening of the school's former campus on Madison Avenue. "It looks humongous to me," said Alice Clay Benedict of the new Lopez campus, which opened last year on LPGA Boulevard across from Municipal Stadium.

Drago and Benedict were among several Father Lopez seniors from the 1959-60 school year who met on the new campus Monday to swap stories about their school days and take a look at what the modern-day school has to offer. It's quite a step up from the Madison Avenue school, just as that school was a big departure from the Quonset hut behind what is now the Basilica of St. Paul, where the 1960 Lopez graduates attended classes before their new school opened. "It was heaven," said Mary Kohrt Fagan, recalling her first impressions of the Madison Avenue school. It was leveled to make way for a Walmart Supercenter for which no construction date has been set.

The alumni marveled at some of the features of the LPGA campus, such as state-of-the-art technology in all classrooms and a football stadium. The Madison Avenue campus had no stadium to start with, recalled Fagan's husband, Dick, who played halfback on a Lopez football team whose home field was a grassy stretch of the Daytona International Speedway infield next to the start-finish line. Father Lopez started the new school year Monday with 324 students, up 17 percent from last year, and 101 freshmen -- the largest ninth-grade class in recent history -- and a 42 percent increase from a year ago.

The modern, new campus that's more easily accessible from West Volusia, Flagler and New Smyrna Beach is one of the reasons for the growth, according to school officials. And despite the economic slowdown, Assistant Principal Sean O'Dell said Lopez's strong academic reputation, faith-based program and relatively small size continue to lure new students. "I think people are reaching for their faith in times of uncertainty," he said.

Tuition at Father Lopez tops out at \$9,000 for Catholic students and \$9,700 for non-Catholics, O'Dell said, but school officials are willing to "make adjustments from there" based on families' ability to pay and available financial aid. The school also accepts state vouchers for low-income students who are underwritten by corporate income-tax credits. Though impressed by the modern upgrades, 1960 grad Dick Fagan wasn't ready to enroll Monday. "This is all great, but it doesn't make me want to go back to high school," he said.



Members of the graduating class of 1960 in front of a mural of Father Lopez at the new campus site commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the opening of the school.

