

# Christ Child School provided early education option

by [Jane McClure](#) // February 10th, 2012

Thirty-five years ago, a remarkable era of education ended on Summit Avenue in St. Paul. Christ Child School for Exceptional Children, which operated in a low-slung, brick building at the southwest corner of Summit and Cleveland avenues, closed its doors. The school was torn down in 2005 to make way for the University of St. Thomas' McNeely Hall. But memories of the school live on through its former students, families and staff.

Christ Child School was founded in 1948 by the late Sister Anna Marie Meyer and operated on Summit from 1950 to 1977. Meyer, a member of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet, dedicated most of her adult life to educating children with physical and cognitive disabilities. In her wheelchair, she was a familiar figure on the area.

In 2005, before the building came down, many people shared their memories. "It was so small, it was like a family," said former school secretary Peggy Schleck.

"That school meant a lot to me. I still think about it," said Mark Thomford, who attended the school from 1960 to 1972.

"We had a lot of fun there," said Kathy Donohue, who attended the school in the 1960s. She and others wanted to save the building's beige bricks as mementos when Christ Child was razed.

"I loved Christ Child School," said Sister Carol Podlasek, who taught students there from 1964 to 1972. "I loved the children and their families." She recalled that the parents were "especially good to work with" and very dedicated to helping their children and the school itself.

For many St. Paul families, Christ Child provided a badly needed educational option. "There weren't many other programs for our children," said Jayne Frank, the mother of a student in the 1950s. "It was so tough in those days."

Were it not for a terrible car accident, Christ Child School might have never opened at all. Meyer was head of the speech department at the College of St. Catherine and was preparing to open a speech and reading clinic at the college in 1932. She was paralyzed from the shoulders down from a car accident while attending a conference in California. She spent the next 8½ years as a patient at St. Joseph's Hospital in St. Paul. During her stay, she began teaching speech and reading at the hospital to disabled children.

After leaving the hospital, Meyer taught in St. Paul parochial schools. She continued to work with students with special needs and opened the St. Paul Delayed Speech School in 1948 at the Christ Child Community Center, which is now Merrick Community Services on St. Paul's East Side. "It was a bare and simple school," Meyer once recalled in a St. Paul *Pioneer Press* interview.

“Its equipment was a pre-primer, a little paper, a box of crayons and a borrowed Victrola.” Enrollment quickly grew and the school soon moved to larger quarters in a home at 2078 Summit Ave. Parents helped paint the walls, varnish the floor, sew curtains and prepare for opening day in the fall of 1950. The school was full the day it opened. That’s when one of Christ Child School’s most generous benefactors stepped forward.

Richard Lilly, president of First National Bank of St. Paul and a member of Christ Child School’s board, had led the effort to purchase the Summit Avenue house and he was soon organizing the effort to construct a new facility. St. Paul philanthropist Ignatius O’Shaughnessy donated four vacant lots west of the school and the Carrie Zimmerman family donated two lots to the east.

More than \$300,000 was raised to construct and equip the new building. Seven lay teachers and a speech therapist were on hand when the building opened in the fall of 1955.

Lilly convinced the archdiocese to take over Christ Child School in 1957. He provided the money for the school to operate, with the stipulation that Meyer be head of the school for as long as she wished.

In 1960, a house at Cleveland and Summit avenues was purchased and converted into an extension school for students ages 16-21. That gave Christ Child graduates a place to learn skills for independent living. Boys learned woodworking and girls learned to cook and sew. That program evolved into an occupational training center, which eventually was spun off a separate agency. The house was later torn down to expand Christ Child.

Young men from St. Thomas and St. Paul Seminary were recruited in the later years to transport children to and from the school and help Meyer get around. The college and seminary students also organized activities for the kids, including their own prom. Meyer became director emeritus of the school in January 1968. Before her death in September 1975, she received numerous honors. Minnesota Gov. Harold LeVander named her “Handicapped Minnesotan of the Year” in 1967. She also won a citation for meritorious service from the President’s Committee on Employment of the Handicapped.

Meyer was succeeded by the late Sister Madaleva Conway, who is also remembered fondly. “She was the epitome of kindness,” Podlasek said. “I always think of her as one of the greatest teachers I ever knew.”

Podlasek said that teaching at Christ Child was one of the most rewarding experiences of her career. “It took a lot more out of you to teach at a school like Christ Child, but it was very rewarding,” she said.

The St. Paul Public Schools’ special education programs eventually took over-serving mentally and physically disabled students and Christ Child School ceased operating in 1977. St. Thomas bought the building for use as classrooms, offices and a child development center. *(This article appeared previously in the Villager, a St. Paul neighborhood newspaper)*

