

# Stories from the Heart



## FACULTY PROFILE:

MARY ELLEN  
RYAN,  
ELEMENTARY  
SCHOOL  
PRINCIPAL

Mary Ellen Ryan's mother, Ellen, knew very early on that her daughter was destined to be a teacher. She could see it as Mary Ellen played with her dolls, or more specifically, as she taught her dolls. Mary Ellen knew it early on as well and started tutoring elementary school students when she was only in Grade 7.

Her passion for education meant an obvious career path, and Mary Ellen, who grew up in Prospect, Nova Scotia, started at Mount Saint Vincent University in 1983 and from there received an integrated Bachelor of Arts and Education Degree. As part of that degree, Mary Ellen's last student placement was here, at Sacred Heart, thanks to some divine intervention from the head of the program, Sr. Agnes Paula. At the end of her placement, Mary Ellen was offered a full-time teaching position by then Principal Joan Dorrington and started as a homeroom teacher in Elementary School.

It was the beginning of a 30-plus-year educational career that still has her as motivated and passionate as when she started. As her early career evolved here, Mary Ellen moved from homeroom teaching to starting the first computer lab and teaching both students and colleagues about the role of IT in education, something that was not so common back then but an area she knew was poised for big growth. She continued to teach as she and her husband David started their family which eventually included two boys, Thomas and Jeremy, who attended Sacred Heart in their early years.

In 2003, then Headmistress Patricia Donnelly suggested Mary Ellen look into the Gifted Education conference at the University of Connecticut (UConn), which she did that very summer when she embarked on a two-week intensive immersion into the program. It instantly clicked and Mary Ellen fell in love with what would become the rest of her life's work. She went on to study at UConn for her master's degree and continued going back for many years after that to continue her education.

Now that the flame was lit, Mary Ellen knew she needed to practice in this specialized area. With very few options available in Canada, she learned about the International Schools Program, and in 2003 chose a three-year placement in Colorado at Flynn Elementary School where she started the Gifted Magnet Program. In her first year, she was recognized as the Teacher of the Year in her school district, validating her new direction. During her three-year term at Flynn, she expanded the program and was well on her way to becoming a specialist in gifted education.

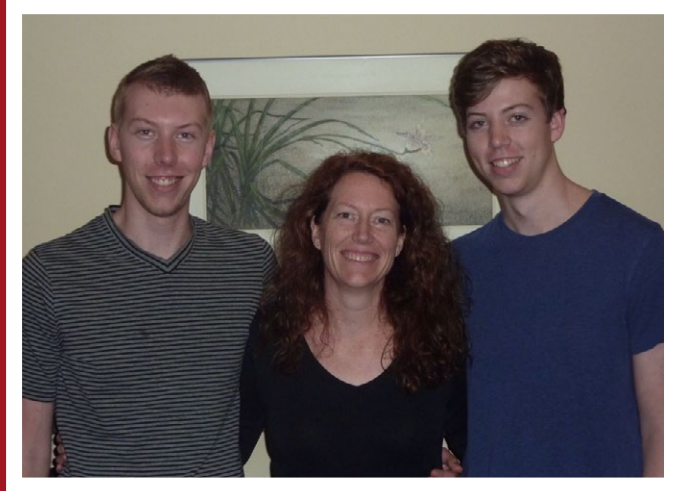


At the end of that short term, she and her family decided another move was in the cards. Adventurers at heart (Mary Ellen has visited 22 countries and counting), they decided to head overseas. In 2006, she started at the Hong Kong International School, one of the top schools in Eastern Asia. It was a whole new world, both culturally and scholastically.

The school was huge, with over 2,600 students. She started as the Specialist Coordinator for Gifted Education. Not long after though, she changed the name of the program and started using the term enrichment rather than gifted, something that was strongly intuitive for her as it better matched her philosophy that education should be inclusive rather than elitist. For her, enrichment was more about a school-wide effort including both students and teachers and allowed all students to find their gifts and talents and to capitalize on them for a deeper educational experience. That experience allowed students to own their learning and to find their voice as they made choices about their educational interests and direction.

Mary Ellen dove deep into this area, immersing herself in the world of enrichment. So much so that she was invited to speak about it throughout East Asia. At the school, she expanded the program, started teaching the teachers, and eventually moved on to become an instructional coach with a particular emphasis on mathematics.

In 2017, Mary Ellen turned her attention to her continuing education journey as she started studying to earn her Principal's certification in International School Leadership through an online program in Ontario. It was a challenging time. Her husband had just passed away and she continued to work full-time, but this deep dive into a new realm of the educational world was both a distraction and the beginning of a new trajectory.



She completed her certification two years later and during that journey, she also found happiness again with her new husband, Kevin.

But sometimes fate throws a wrench into plans, even if that wrench turns out to be a blessing in disguise. In late March of 2024, Mary Ellen got a call that her mother who was still in Prospect, Nova Scotia had taken ill. Mary Ellen came home to see her and after a short visit, returned to Hong Kong only to be told she immediately needed to go back. Her mother passed away shortly thereafter. One day later, Mary Ellen got a call from her cousin and long-time Senior School Counsellor Carolyn MacKenzie, to let her know that the Elementary School Principal role at Sacred Heart would be open for the coming school year. As has happened many times in Mary Ellen's life, fate intervened — it was the only role in the world she was interested in for her last move within the field of education.

Mary Ellen interviewed for the role and quickly distinguished herself with Head of School, Dennis Phillips and the search committee, and she was offered the job. Fairly quickly, given their life was a world away, she and Kevin packed up and moved back to Nova Scotia. Mary Ellen returned home to Prospect where she grew up and came home to Sacred Heart where she first started her educational career and where she plans to end it.

With her, she brings an insatiable desire to provide an exceptional education to young students. She is also introducing enrichment and differentiated programming to the Elementary School to increase the School's educational discernment practices and elevate the learning experience for our youngest students.

As Mary Ellen settles into her second term at Sacred Heart, she is discovering some things have changed and some important things haven't — the loving, supportive environment within this community and the dedication and talent of the faculty.

**We are thrilled to have Mary Ellen back at the Heart and look forward to the many contributions we know she will make. Welcome home!**

# RSCJ COMMEMORATIVE BENCH UNVEILED IN THE FALL



If you were following along last year during our 175th Anniversary celebrations, you may have noticed that we chose to honour the RSCJ's dedication, leadership, and unwavering support to our School and community by commemorating a bench in the Public Gardens. We were delighted to see this vision become a reality last fall when Srs. Kim King, Beverley McNamara, Donna Dolan '60, Anne-Marie Conn '65, and Mary Finlayson joined us for the installation, along with members of our Halifax RSCJ Associates and some of our School administrators. Head of School Dennis Phillips led a blessing of the bench and gave thanks for the 175 years of courage and confidence from the RSCJ. We welcome you to seek out this bench the next time you're in the Public Gardens to enjoy some peace and solitude and we encourage you to take a moment to reflect on the enduring legacy of the RSCJ, one that continues to inspire and guide us. If you do, send [Riley Goedkoop](#) a photo and we'll share it on our Alum Facebook page.

# INAUGURAL SACRED HEART SUMMIT — CONNECTIONS



In October of last year, Sacred Heart School of Halifax joined with 24 other Network Schools from the United States and Canada at the first-ever Sacred Heart Summit in Chicago. The theme, "Hearts Rooted in Change", offered a vibrant arena for intergenerational learning and action which brought together educators, students, RSCJ, alums, and Mission partners within the extensive Sacred Heart community. At the Summit, discussions and sessions provided a deeper understanding of how we can enact change, champion the common good, and uphold the dignity of individuals on a global scale. The Summit reminded us of the importance of being part of a Network with a shared Mission and an invested community that is committed to fostering compassion, hope, justice, and solidarity throughout the world. Big thanks to the Network and also our delegation which was highly engaged in the Summit, especially on the Truth and Reconciliation side.



# PAGING ELISABETH CORMIER!



Politics has been in Elisabeth Cormier's '24 veins since she was young. Her grandmother was politically active in Nova Scotia which fuelled her interest in social studies and civics. In 2023, she worked on a political campaign for a Halifax candidate which gave Elisabeth some great insights.

The first time she heard about the House of Commons Page Program, she knew instinctively it was for her. That was the easy part. The hard part was getting into the program as there are typically thousands of applications for only 40 spots.

Undaunted, Elisabeth applied and after a six-month process that included written applications, language skill testing, and face-to-face interviews, Elisabeth was accepted into the program. Once she was accepted into the University of Ottawa in the Honors Bachelor of Science program, she was set.

Elisabeth started at UofO and the Page Program in early September 2024 and hasn't looked back. She's been on the floor of the House of Commons for a very eventful year that has included three votes of non-confidence, the resignation of our current Prime Minister, and the introduction of Canadian Olympians. And while it means some very long and intense days balancing the role and her school work, she is loving the experience. She has met some fascinating people and has had the privilege of seeing the behind-the-scenes and inner workings of our parliamentary democracy.

Although Elisabeth is intent on a law career, she acknowledges there may be an avenue where politics could be incorporated. In the meantime, she looks forward to the rest of her one-year term. We look forward to seeing where this interesting journey will ultimately take Elisabeth.

## CHARLOTTE RILEY - KEEPER OF THE CLOCK

A lover of tradition, faculty member Charlotte Riley '81 jumped at the chance to ensure the historic Grandfather Clock, located in the Portry of the Historic Entrance, was regularly maintained. For her, it was not just about ensuring this beloved piece, originally donated by the Shatford Family to honour their daughters' education, continues to keep accurate time, but also because it allows her to remember and honour her friend and longtime Sacred Heart receptionist Marilyn Hinch who used to work in the Portry. A number of our alums will remember Marilyn who was a steadfast and beloved presence in the Portry for many years.

Charlotte lovingly winds the clock by hand twice a week when school is in session and ensures it continues to tick, well, like...clockwork!



# ALUMS & PALS WINE AND CHEESE WAS A SMASHING SUCCESS!

There was a whole lot of reminiscing and catching up this past December at what was perhaps the best-attended Alums & PALS Wine and Cheese in our history! Thanks to everyone who took the time to drop in and share some cheer with us.



# MARK YOUR CALENDARS!

## SAVE THE DATE

April 26  
6:00 p.m.  
Pier 21, Halifax

Our amazing  
**FUN**draiser in  
support of our  
Bursary Fund!



## AASH

### Upcoming AASH Events

The Associated Alumnae & Alumni of the Sacred Heart is hosting its next conference in Los Angeles from April 3-5. Join fellow alums, including a group from Halifax, from across North America. [Registration](#) is now open.

Alums are also invited to join AASH for a webinar on February 26th featuring Sr. Anne Dyer, RSCJ as she speaks on the subject of the Sacred Heart Family Tree. The start time for the webinar is 3:00 p.m. EST/4:00 p.m. AST. The Zoom link for this event will be posted on the [AASH website](#).

## Calling All Theatre Lovers!

Are you wondering if a theatrical performance is worth going to? Look no further than Twisi — a theatre blog run by alumna Amanda Campbell '02. A true theatre geek, Amanda holds an Honours BA in Theatre Studies from Dalhousie and an MA in Drama Studies from the University of Toronto. She credits her time at Sacred Heart, first as part of the Elementary School choir and then as a performer in various school musicals, for her love of the genre. She went on to act at Neptune and Elsinore Theatres and eventually made her professional acting debut at the Bathurst Street Theatre in 2010. She has also written a number of plays. She works primarily as a theatre critic, although she continues to TA at the Fountain School of Performing Arts. Amanda writes about the Atlantic Canadian scene and is a frequent contributor to local media. We love her recent review of Neptune Theatre's *Frozen: The Broadway Musical*, which incidentally, features current Sacred Heart student, Jorja Mastrapas, daughter of alumna Vickie Mastrapas '01. You can read Amanda's review [here](#), and while you're there, subscribe to her [blog](#)!





# Tidbits



It is with profound sadness that we share the news that **Sr. Theresa Chu, RSCJ** died peacefully in her sleep on February 2nd. Sr. Chu had just turned 100 in November, and as you can see in this photo, celebrated at home while enjoying flowers, many cards, and a gift of 100 chocolate kisses from the School. Sr. Chu will be lovingly remembered for her wisdom, quiet grace, and many contributions to the RSCJ and Sacred Heart. To remember Sr. Chu, you may wish to revisit this 2022 interview, [Threads of Life](#), in which Campus Minister, Moira Schrader, interviews Sr. Chu about her remarkable life. You can read Sr. Chu's obituary [here](#). Rest in Peace.



After 19 years of making invaluable contributions to our School and students, Executive Assistant to the Head of School **Patricia Nichols** retired at the end of 2024. Pat served three Heads of School and was beloved by our entire community. Sacred Heart will never be the same without her! We wish her and Dale, PALs to alumna Dr. Kelly Nichols '09, well as they ease into this new stage of life.



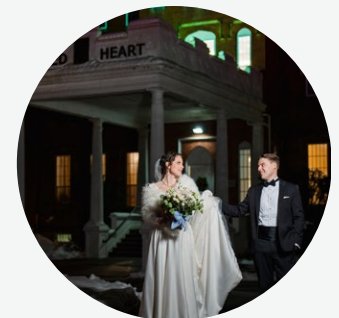
Well done to **Sarah MacAskill '21** who recently took part in the world's largest fitness festival, the Wodapalooza in Miami, Florida. Sarah and her teammates were the top Canadian team at the qualifiers — an amazing achievement!



In September, we took part in the Sacred Heart Network's 50th Anniversary Virtual Prayer Service. Schools across the Network were united in prayer, reflections, and thanksgiving as we honoured our shared Mission, faith, and education.



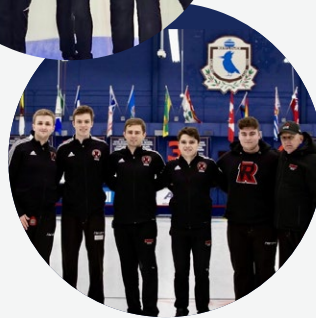
Members of the **Class of '71** continue to maintain their strong bonds as evidenced by a summer get-together last year as Lesley Bell Bleil hosted fellow classmates Loly Cortes Crowley, Donald MacDonald Cody, Janet Single Jackson, Wanda Marsman (and Wanda's daughter Amber). Likely they're already plotting their 55th Reunion in 2026!



Congratulations to **Anna Ferguson '13** and her husband Thomas Munro who were married on December 28th here at the School! Anna and Thomas chose Sacred Heart because it is such a special place for her. As she explains, "Not only is it a beautiful venue, my Mom (Nicole Ferguson '86), my sister (Mia Ferguson '17) and I are all alumni of Sacred Heart. It was a way to feel connected to my roots as I made this commitment to my husband."



Hats off to **Sylvia Driscoll-Sangster '17** who recently joined the team at Halifax Kids Physio as a full-time physiotherapist.



Congratulations to the Beland siblings — **Meghan '18** and **Sean '22** — both of whom are competitive curlers, on their recent national success. Meghan's team won silver in the recent Canadian women's championship while Sean's UNB curling team qualified to go to the USports nationals in Lethbridge in February and will also attempt to qualify for the Brier at the New Brunswick Tankard.



Who's up for a challenge? There are two spots left for the **2025 Sacred Heart Cabot Trail Relay team, "The Young and the Rest of Us"** which is composed of Sacred Heart faculty, staff, and alumni. If you're a serious runner and are interested in joining the team to tackle this legendary race, please reach out to faculty member, [Shoneth Leadbetter](#). Each leg is between 12.5-20.5 km and runners must be able to run a 5:35 pace.



Congratulations to **Hannah Baillie '18**, who graduated last year from MSVU with her Master's Degree in Public Administration and has started working at KPMG as a Consultant, Digital Healthcare Transformation here in Halifax

Big thanks to alums **Freddy Bekkers, Connor Johnston '21, Ivan Lawen '22, Charlie Simms '22, Ryan Smith '22, and Julia Smyth '20** who are giving back to their alma mater by coaching or helping with our Jr. and Sr. athletic teams. It's so great to have them involved in such a meaningful way.

Hats off to **Katie Polley '18** who recently graduated with a Masters Degree in Carbon Management from the University of Edinburgh and is starting an internship in February.



Kudos to **Jaime Jacques '94** who has just been awarded the Elizabeth Venart Prize for Emerging Writers by the Writer's Federation of Nova Scotia. Jaime, a poet and author, was recognized as an early-career writer for an already impressive body of work.



Thanks to **Maria Smith '80**, who stopped in to check out our Christmas Fair this past November in support of our fundraising efforts. Maria was in town from Toronto visiting her mother and eldest daughter who is completing a master's program at Dalhousie. She was thrilled to be back at her alma mater with her classmate and friend, **Miriam Regan '80**, our Director of Advancement & Alumni Relations.

# Registration is open for Summer Camps!

If you're looking for great summer camp options for your child this August, check out our 2025 program. There are full-day camps for students in Grades P-5 and half-day camps for Grades 6-8 with lots of cool options like rugby, soccer, art, golf, and sportball! Learn more and register [here](#). Camps are open to the public, so secure your spot now.

## Reconnect with a Reunion!

Are you an alum from years ending in 5? It's time to start planning your milestone reunion! Reach out to [Miriam Regan](#) or [Riley Goedkoop](#) for help planning your gathering.



## Legacy Admissions

It gives us no end of delight when we see generations of families at Sacred Heart. This year, we have 41 students who have a parent or grandparent who attended Sacred Heart, including new families this year, Ana Hung '08 and her daughter Isla, Sara Beth Pace '05 with her daughter Livia, and Giovanni Pagnottella '11 and his daughter, Mia (pictured here).

**If you're an alum in Halifax with school-aged children, we hope you're considering your alma mater!** Please reach out to our Director of Admissions, [Marie Reyes](#), to start a conversation. We have tuition assistance options available.



# We Want to Hear from You!

Share your stories, news, photos, and announcements, or pass along regards to a favourite teacher or former classmate.

**Drop Miriam an email!**

## SUPPORT YOUR SCHOOL!

THE 2024 CHARITABLE DONATION DEADLINE  
HAS BEEN EXTENDED TO FEBRUARY 28TH.

**DONATE** TO OUR ANNUAL GIVING FUND TODAY!



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