



JON JACOBSON

'We've gone through fire and been tested': Sister Catherine Dunn, Clarke president

Rising From the Ashes

Clarke College survives a trial by fire, turning disaster into a golden opportunity for renewal

It was two days before graduation in 1984 when the hilltop campus caught fire, and Clarke College burned down after-noon until early morning. The awful pyrotechnics incinerated four major buildings at the Roman Catholic coed institution in Dubuque, Iowa, and left 30 nuns homeless. Students who stood in forlorn clusters, holding hands and wondering whether the school would survive, heard a fervent affirmation from Sister Catherine Dunn, who had then been president of Clarke for only 111 days. Marching along the police lines with a bullhorn, Dunn announced that final exams would be rescheduled and insisted that the school would rise, triumphant, from the ashes of the accidental blaze. Sure enough, Dunn reopened the devastated school at 8 a.m. the following day. By noon she had counselors telephoning reassurances to every applicant—and was embarked on a mighty salvage mission.

Today, 30 months later, it is clear that Clarke has turned disaster into opportunity. Contractors are putting finishing touches on a state-of-the-art campus that was built to serve for 150 years. Gleaming new structures flank a huge atrium, yet blend skillfully with the pitched, red-tile roofs of

the old buildings that withstood the fire. Innumerable clever design features mean students at the school—which opened in 1843 as the Midwest's first women's college—will reap the grandest rewards of a reconstruction they helped plan. "Small schools need something that says, 'Bang—this is the spirit of the place!'" says Chicago architect Percy E. Roberts. "Clarke's new campus will help achieve that."

Students and administrators say the synergies occurred largely because Roberts's prestigious firm, Vickrey Ovesat Awwsumb, set up shop in a campus lounge and invited endless opinions from anyone who

Up in smoke: Blaze destroyed four major buildings

TELEGRAPH/HERALD



had an idea about Clarke. Many faculty members helped design facilities exactly as they wished. Librarian Paul Roberts—no relation to the architect—will have twice the space he had before the blaze, plus a fully computerized catalog that students can instantly examine from 50 terminals scattered across the campus. And with space to spare, Clarke's library is now growing at five times its normal pace. Roberts, who had to freeze-dry some waterlogged volumes, is even adding new subject areas with books obtained from less fortunate small colleges that have closed. "We're growing," he says confidently. "I'm the only librarian around who accepts donated books by the ton."

Encircled by music: Fine touches abound. The wraparound balcony in the performing-arts hall will permit music director John Lease to experimentally

surround his audiences with live sound. In a well-lit print laboratory, ventilators quietly remove the inevitable solvent fumes. One end of the atrium is terraced to offer noontime seating for readings or small performances. And a partially concave front lawn now boasts a sculpted outdoor amphitheater.

The new buildings are virtually maintenance-free, accessible to the handicapped and wired for futuristic telecommunications systems. Broad windows swathe library study areas, highlighting the tree-topped limestone hills around Clarke. "At last we have open spaces again," says student-body president Lisa Hawks.

Insurance covered two-thirds of the \$13 million loss. The rest will come from donors, including phenomenally loyal grads who routinely keep Clarke debt-free; their donation rate is among the nation's highest, easily upstaging such alumni favorites as Harvard and Notre Dame. In the short term the president must deal with an unexpected avalanche of requests to conduct weddings in the new atrium, a facility

that will also be the site for student affairs, community events and seminars. For the long haul Dunn is adding academic programs. She trusts that Clarke's new splendors will make recruiting far easier, and she foresees enrollment climbing from 900 to 1,200. "We've gone through fire and been tested," she says. "Any student who passes through here will encounter that strength."

JOHN MCCORMICK in Dubuque