

A Second-Grade Expert

The Academic Life of Carol Vacca Denslow

By Landon Robinson and Harrison McLaughlin

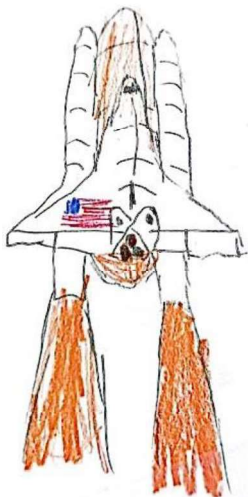
Imagine teaching at the same school and in the same second grade for decades. Well, that's what Mrs. Carol Vacca Denslow did. She taught second grade for 37 years at her alma mater, St. Michael School, then located on Liberty Street in Pawcatuck, prior to retiring in 2013.

Mrs. Denslow grew up in Pawcatuck and attended St. Michael School from first through eighth grade, graduating in 1963. Her sisters Rosemary and Sandra also went to St. Michael's as did her mother, Marie Lidestri Vacca, who graduated in June 1940. Mrs. Denslow was in a large class of 40 students throughout her years at St. Michael's. Almost all of the teachers were nuns who lived in the convent next door to the school and who belonged to the Sisters of Mercy, an order founded in Ireland and made up of Roman Catholic women dedicated to a life of poverty, chastity, obedience, and service. The sisters taught all of the subjects, including specials such as music, and were very strict.

It was an exciting time. Sputnik, the world's first satellite, was launched in 1957 by the Soviet Union while she was in third grade. Three years later when she was in sixth grade, John F. Kennedy was elected the first Catholic president of the United States and the "Space Race" to the Moon between Cold War rivals the United States and the Soviet Union began to heat up. Tragically, JFK was assassinated in 1963, five months after Mrs. Denslow graduated from St. Michael.

The school day at St. Michael's started at 9:00 a.m. and ended at 3:00 p.m. with a one-hour break for lunch so students who lived nearby could walk home and eat lunch there and students who lived far away ate lunch in the basement of St. Michael Church. She recollected field trips to some farms and fire stations, but her favorite memory was when she and her classmates decorated May baskets each spring filled with toiletries for the nuns. After school, she would sometimes walk to Higgins Pharmacy and buy a chocolate coke—a coke with chocolate syrup that she said was yummy—or she might go watch a movie at the United Theatre with her friends. Mrs. Denslow went onto Stonington High and Central Connecticut State College, where she studied elementary education, before returning to her alma mater in the fall of 1972 and assuming the second-grade teaching role from the retiring Mrs. Eleanor Arcangel.

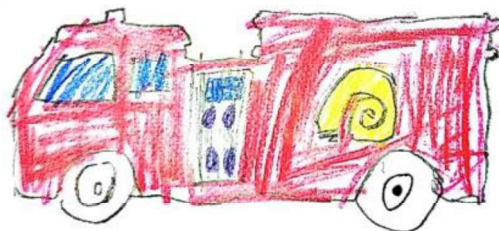
While she was a teacher, some major events happened such as the Space Shuttle Challenger exploding in January 1986



with Christa McAuliffe, the first teacher in space, aboard, and the September 11, 2001, al-Qaeda terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center towers in New York City and the Pentagon in Washington, D.C. She noted that she did not discuss these events with her students unless they asked about them. “They were so young, so we just prayed for everyone who was hurt,” she said.

During her nearly four decades of teaching second grade, Mrs. Denslow had the opportunity to teach her son Christopher, daughter Michelle and granddaughter Vanessa. She also had the added responsibility of preparing hundreds of students for the Sacraments of Reconciliation and Holy Eucharist. She said she liked to teach Confession and First Communion classes.

One of her most fun memories was when she got to ride on a fire truck from the station back to the school. She and first-grade teacher Sister Margaret took their classes on a field trip to the Pawcatuck Fire Station. At the end of the outing, teachers and students all rode back up Liberty Street hill to the school on a fire engine. She shared: “Sister Margaret and I were standing on the back holding onto the grab bars!”



We learned so much from interviewing Mrs. Denslow, and we especially liked that students in the 1950s and 60s were able to go home for an hour for lunchtime. She said that St. Michael’s had a nurturing environment and she loved being there. “I would not trade my time as a student or teacher at St. Michael’s for anything,” she said. “I would gladly teach or be a student again!”



The interviewees on April 24th, 2026, in St. Michael Church Hall.

Front row (l to r): Fran Cawley, Julie Gulino, Jane Martley, Catharine Danie, Gerry Spillane, Jane Brannegan and Doris Messina. Back row (l to r): Cathy Holdridge, Carol Denslow, Michael Nowak, Dan Brannegan, Joe Donohue, Chris Gomes and Don Fiore. Missing: David Kmetz.

Photo courtesy of Gregg Gulino.



The seventh and eighth graders with the interviewees, St. Michael Church Hall, April 24, 2026.

Photo courtesy of Gregg Gulino.