Sleeveless Dresses

The School Life of Catharine Lenihan Danie

By Becca Koswaski and Kaliyan Lamorge
(Becca is the great-granddaughter of Mrs. Danie)

We interviewed my great-grandmother, Mrs. Catharine Lenihan Danie. Our conversation started with small talk. She graduated from St. Michael School in 1952 in a class with 28 students. She enjoyed math and had to do penmanship sheets to work on her cursive very often.

Friends were a big part of Mrs. Danie's life. She was friends with everyone but became very close with Eleanor O'Brien and Joan McMahon. They would walk to school together, have lunch together, and call each other on their house phones. The three of them and a few other students would run all the way from the "old" school building on Liberty Street to someone's house on Courtland Street, where they would eat lunch together on school days. She would also be with them on the weekends either at Wilcox Park in downtown Westerly or having lunch at each other's houses. She was in Girl Scouts and The Children of Mary with them (the latter a school program for girls, dedicated to the Blessed Mother).

Even though St. Michael School did not require uniforms during the 1940s and 50s, the nuns devised dress codes that kept outfits pretty similar. One day when Mrs. Danie and Mrs. O'Brien were in 8th grade, Mrs. Danie's aunt bought her a beautiful black plaid dress with sleeves that did not quite cover the shoulders. Eleanor got a similar dress and the two of them decided to wear them that Monday. When they got to school it only took a few minutes before Sister Sheila, who was not only their teacher but their principal said, "Eleanor O'Brien and Catharine Lenihan, please stand." Confused, the two of them stood. "Now look at these girls. They don't have enough money for sleeves for their dresses! Don't you feel bad for them?" The two girls sat down insanely shocked and embarrassed. Mrs. Danie later told her mother and all she said was "You'll just have to wear a sweater next time."



Although there were some strict rules—such as boys and girls having separate entrances into the school—and strict nuns like Sister Sheila, there were also nice things about the school. Mrs. Danie elaborated: "It was fun at school. I liked getting the holy days off." Also, they did not have to worry about fundraisers, mainly because they had nothing to raise money for; however, they found other donations to collect. They went around the neighborhood with their classmates

collecting magazines, newspapers, and anything else people were willing to donate for the benefit of St. Michael School. During Christmas season, students sold religious stamps for use as decorations on presents and cards. They gave this money to the church.



Sister Marie, the seventh-grade teacher, was what made Mrs. Danie want to come to school most days. She was kind and always cared for the students. However, when they did not listen, she knew how to get their attention. She would slam her belt on students' desks. This may seem scary, but, while Mrs. Danie was telling us this she was laughing and remembering! She told us so much, making us laugh too and smile at her stories. It was also fascinating to hear about WWII drills, students hiding under their school desks and not making a sound. Every day at St. Michael School, even in the war years, was good to Mrs. Danie.

We enjoyed Mrs. Danie's stories from when she was a student at St. Michael's and appreciated learning about the differences between school then and school now. All of her memories showed us how much school has changed and put a smile on all three of our faces.



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.