

Orsini's return to St. Anthony like 'homecoming'

By EDWIN TANJI, City Editor

Wednesday, April 11, 2007 11:38 AM

WAILUKU – A veteran leader of the St. Anthony Church, the Rev. James Orsini, is returning as principal of St. Anthony Junior-Senior High School succeeding Edwina Wilson-Snyder.

Students were informed Tuesday morning of the move, resulting from doctor's orders that Wilson-Snyder, 66, give up the post for health reasons.

She said her doctor has been telling her to ease back at the office, but Wilson-Snyder – who retired from the state Department of Education in 2001 – said she felt compelled to pursue her goals in the post to which she was appointed in January 2004.

Orsini, who shepherded the St. Anthony parish through one of its most difficult periods when the historic Wailuku church was destroyed by a fire on Halloween in 1977, was serving the parishes in Haiku, Paia and Keanae when he applied for the principal's position.

But he has a history with St. Anthony, overseeing the parish that included the St. Anthony schools before he was promoted to serve as vice president for Chaminade University on Oahu, where he said he insisted on having a class to teach.

He said he asked Bishop Larry Silva if he could apply for the St. Anthony post when Wilson-Snyder announced she would have to retire at the end of the school year.

"I never dreamed he would let me go back to being in education," Orsini said.

He recalled that he was first assigned to St. Anthony as a much younger priest in 1968, when the school was first moving away from separate boys and girls schools to go fully coeducational.

His current assignment as pastor to the rural parishes of St. Rita, Holy Rosary and St. Gabriel has been fulfilling, he said. He said he was glad when he was offered the parish assignment that allowed him to return to Maui.

Now, going back to St. Anthony, he said, "it's like a homecoming."

Wilson-Snyder took over the school during a difficult period when declining enrollment forced layoffs that provoked a protest by students during the spring of the 2002-03 school year.

"When you come in the middle of the school year, it says something isn't working," she said. A 1958 graduate of St. Anthony, Wilson-Snyder said she felt challenged but also felt she could help her alma mater, which was struggling with ongoing deficits.

Since taking over, the enrollment has grown to 327 this year, from 276 when she was named

school president. She has had to increase tuition, but she said she also has been able to increase financial aid.

“What’s been really helped is the way that the alumni has stepped up to give their support to help,” she said.

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