

Open for business

by Bill Fallon

"We thought you were closed."

It's a misperception that can wreck a bottom line: people stop going there (a store) or stop giving there (a nonprofit). As an untrue obituary, it has bedeviled Maureen Tomkiel ever since the parent hospital her facility called home went bankrupt and was sold several years ago. "I'm still hearing it," she said. "People still think we closed."

So, early on and for the record: the facilities for disabled youth on the St. Agnes Hospital campus in White Plains never closed and remain at their same North Street location, helping 300 day students - about a 50-50 split between those who go to school there and those who receive home-based services - move through their educations and nearly 4,000 more who use the health care programs of the associated rehabilitation center.

The St. Agnes facility had something of a doppelganger in Manhattan, the Elizabeth Seton Pediatric Center: "same mission, same vision, same devoted staff," said Tomkiel. And when St. Agnes went under and Elizabeth Seton entered the equation, "Our program was a fit: education for special-needs kids getting pediatric care." The two are now merging forces and Tomkiel keeps up the drumbeat fighting the misperception her facility closed with St. Agnes. There's something out of whack when doing well by

doing good, coupled with a dynamic new partnership, should conjure visions of Abe Vigoda {still not dead}.



Tomkiel is executive director of the John A. Coleman School and Children's Rehabilitation Center, both nonprofits (There is also a John A Coleman School at the Manhattan facility with which Tomkiel's original St. Agnes facility will now partner.)

Tomkiel's disabled programs -all day-side, no boarding -were run by the Sisters of St. Francis at St. Agnes and were a favorite interest of New York Diocese leader John Cardinal O'Connor. O'Connor died in 2000, but his successor, just-retired Edward Cardinal Egan, became part of what Tomkiel called "a legacy of commitment" from the Catholic Church to keep the facility open.

"Cardinal O'Connor did not want it closed," Tomkiel said. "We had helped

thousands of children in Putnam, in Westchester, in New York City and he was not going to see that end. Cardinal Egan was part of that legacy of commitment.”

The misperception the John A. Coleman School and twin Children's Rehabilitation Center have closed arises from the location at 317 North St. in White Plains, on the St. Agnes Hospital campus, now otherwise transitioning to a mixed-use, assisted living facility. "When St. Agnes went bankrupt, people thought we closed, too," said Tomkiel, a 30-plus-years veteran of the facility, working first under the aegis of the Sisters of St. Francis and now under the Sisters of Charity. The Sisters of Charity run the Elizabeth Seton Pediatric Center in Manhattan, a facility now scheduled to move to Yonkers, with groundbreaking slated for this Summer. Seton Pediatric Center will become the parent organization of Tomkiel's White Plains facility, a process already begun. The combined facilities operate with a budget of \$16 million per year.

As a high school girl at St. Claire's - now closed -in Hastings-on-Hudson, Tomkiel's life journey began the instant she encountered a disabled boy while working off her service commitment for a school club. " . Her education continued through Mount St. Vincent College -psychology degree - -and on to graduate school at Fordham University, which earned her certification as a school supervisor and administrator and were part of the puzzle that now finds her school certified by both the state Department of Education and Department of Health.

Tomkiel will be honored this month by Manhattanville College with its Valiant Educator Award. It's an award she shares

with the staff. "It's a team effort and we strive toward excellence in education," she said. "Our programs are based on respect and our programs recognize the unique differences and abilities with children. Our graduations -about 45 students per year -are amazing. I still get goose humps. You look out at the parents and you see all these emotions: joy, struggle, fear, it's all there - especially pride."

Tomkiel is married to Ed Tomkiel and has a stepdaughter, Jennifer. She sites famed newsman Lowell Thomas, a Pawling resident, in calling her home town "heaven on Earth."



Toward that Eden-like observation, Tomkiel grows flowers. "It takes me away from the daily stresses," she said. "It puts me in the now. I love the digging, the nurturing, Saturday morning visits to the nurseries. I think both children *and* gardening put me in the now."

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