

Three Cheers for Ms. O!

It's easy to see how **Sue Orlando** was a cheerleader in high school. She brings that same energy, enthusiasm, spirit, and support to our littlest Rams every day in her role as Lower School physical education teacher. This fall marks the start of her 38th year guiding students to healthy activity—making physical education fun and exciting—and she's just as enthusiastic now as when she started.

Growing up, Orlando describes herself as a kid who "would rather play a game than sit down and read a book." She was always on the move and eagerly went to ballgames with her father. She knew from an early age that she was destined to teach. She was a baton twirler, traveling and competing. Around sixth grade, her instructor, who was also an elementary school teacher, asked her to assist with the younger twirlers. She enjoyed babysitting. Later, a middle school physical education teacher and a high school psychology teacher reinforced the message: You are good with children. You should look into being a teacher. She agreed, and after graduating from high school attended Culver-Stockton College to get a degree in psychology and her teaching certificate.

She began teaching in the Northwest School District but soon suffered from district cutbacks. As a newer employee, she was one of the first to go. She worked in a dentist's office for a year,



Sue Orlando in her early days at Mary Institute.



then at the Washington University dental school for another. She knew she wanted to get back into teaching, so she answered an ad in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* for a teaching position at a school she had never heard of: Mary Institute. Orlando started in a part-time role and was hired full-time the following year. She has also served as the physical education department chair and interim athletic director, but her true love is elementary level PE. She eagerly accepted the charge to create some consistency in the Lower School, serving in the role alone after a colleague's retirement and before **Jim Lohr** was hired. With his arrival, Orlando had found a true partner and together they have built the program for 27 years.

This program goes beyond the PE classes that many of us knew when we were kids. Gone are the days of seemingly endless square dancing or deadly dodgeball. Orlando remembers that when

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she first started, it was common to teach kids the fundamentals of basketball and then choose two students to be “captains,” letting them select their teams. The process divided children into groups of winners and losers, titles that often stuck beyond the walls of the gym. “It has evolved so much to be more student-centered and friendly for the kids,” she said. “We want kids to be able to move and be active and be comfortable with themselves, not to be focused on being on teams. Our goal is to build a well-rounded child who is able to move and comfortably play anything. And who enjoys playing it.”

The other way Orlando and Lohr ensure children are comfortable learning in Lower School PE is to right-size their equipment. “We bring things down to their levels, including using lower baskets and smaller balls for the basketball unit. They don’t even realize what they’re practicing in that unit because they’re just having fun,” she said. Every two weeks, students move on and learn a new game, a new skill. This timing keeps the students engaged and excited about each unit, and gives their teachers plenty of time to develop skills to build upon the next year. “The program grows with the kids,” Orlando explained. “And their expectations grow appropriately as they grow.”

Growing children is Orlando’s favorite part of her job. “We probably know the kids better even than their homeroom teachers by the time they leave Beasley for the Middle School,” she said, “because we get to see them every day and we have them for six years.” The Lower School PE program starts with Junior Kindergarteners learning to skip and progresses through team sports. Orlando and Lohr set goals for their little athletes: they want to be sure students are able to move correctly and function in the daily PE world, to know that it’s important to do things to keep them healthy. The team isn’t focused so much on developing specific skills in their students, but developing the mindset that a healthy body means opportunity. “It’s important to be a well-rounded person who is active and not in front of a screen all the time,” she said.

The COVID-19 pandemic forced Orlando and Lohr to re-think their entire curriculum. During distance learning, they made and shared videos to encourage students at home to get up, get out, and move. Upon returning to campus, they moved PE outside every single day to keep kids spaced apart while giving them plenty of room to move. They reinvented PE at MICDS, including creating



new tools such as large hoops that helped guide kids to safe distances. Sharing equipment was out of the question at that time, too, and they couldn’t even play simple games like tag. Always creative, Orlando and Lohr came up with new ways to play old games. They purchased foam noodles that allowed kids to play tag, carefully disinfecting them each night. A large speaker and a microphone meant lively music and Lohr’s deep voice could be heard booming across the campus as he encouraged students to run, jump, dance, and play. They seized opportunities as they arose, such as using snow-covered hills on campus for sledding. “It was like being a new teacher again, growing and learning,” Orlando said. “Even though we look for new activities every year anyway.” She quickly shrugged off all the hard work of reinventing almost the entire PE program in less than a year. “It’s not about us, it’s about the kids.”

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In addition to the natural creativity sparked by their close, collaborative partnership, Orlando and Lohr look outside for new ideas. The duo has attended three SHAPE America conventions, an event that gathers health and physical education professionals from across the country who teach K-12 and beyond. They are also members of the American Alliance for Health, Physical Education, Recreation, and Dance, which provides support and assistance as members seek new ways to engage students. Orlando loves to see what other schools are offering in their PE program, and is often reminded that she's not challenged when it comes to access and resources. "Other schools are amazed that we see our students every day," she said. "We have space, we have equipment...we have everything. We are blessed to be here. I love to get up and come to work every day."

It's good that Orlando loves what she does, since set-up for the day's activities can sometimes take up to an hour. "We want to entice the students," she said, and that can mean everything from setting up for an Olympic competition in the South Gym or preparing for swim lessons in the Steward Family Aquatic Center. Sometimes they teach Tinikling, a traditional folk dance of the Philippines that involves keeping rhythm with poles while partners step and jump. It promotes balance, coordination, speed, and agility, all the goals Orlando and Lohr work into each unit. The students love it. This year, they were especially intrigued by the Olympics unit; the day we spoke was bobsled day, which involved students pushing each other around cones in the gym, with participants sitting on mats stacked on scooters. "It is like organized chaos," Orlando laughed. "The kids know what to do and where to go, and they know when it's their turn."



Orlando also coached Upper School field hockey and racquetball for 29 years, so she was able to see many of her students through a deep progression of skills. Now, she's thrilled to teach the children of many of her former students. "It's unbelievable, the number of kids I've had go through where I've taught their moms and dads. It's a long line of connections with families." Two or three families who attended our admission Open House this year were delighted to see their PE teacher. "I haven't seen them in 20 years, and they say, 'Ms. O, you're still here! We have little ones coming!'" she said. Younger Beasley School alumni also like to visit. "The Middle School kids are always sticking their heads in the gym or stopping by," Orlando said. "They'll say, 'Oh, you're doing the Olympics! I remember doing that.'" She loves staying in touch with her former students.

"Being with the kids is my favorite part of the day," Orlando said. We're sure many of her students feel exactly the same way.

