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A Force of One, Serving Many

* A fierce advocate for children builds schools from nothing.

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A strong wind could knock him over. The kids playing in the schoolyard almost do. But never mind; at 91, Father Ernest Sillers is still a force. As he walks the campus of St. Mary's and All Angels School in Aliso Viejo, one of four--soon to be five--Southland schools that the retired Episcopal priest has founded over the last four decades, children flock to him, locking him in exuberant hugs. They seem to know, if only instinctively, that he is their tireless advocate.

Since retiring from the priesthood 26 years ago, he has made educating children his mission. Retirement was boring, he recalls, so he kept asking God what else he could do. The answer he got was: Save My Children.

"He's the Father Junipero Serra of schools," says Mark Campaigne, headmaster of one of Sillers' schools, St. Margaret's Episcopal School in San Juan Capistrano. And when it comes to garnering parental support, Campaigne dubs him "the Pied Piper."

Wearing a cleric's collar and a white baseball cap with a surfing logo, a navy pinstriped suit and a plastic digital watch, Sillers has a foot in at least two worlds: the world of children and the world of business.

"I saw a need for schools to develop children into the person God wanted them to be--strong in academic and moral development with an emphasis on values. When a school mingles values with the precepts of education, it makes a difference in homes. It makes a difference in the community, and if you get enough going, it makes a difference in the world."

Though he's angered more than a few over the years, his work draws mostly praise. Advocates see a guy with incredible vision, even in

his waning years, making a difference in the beleaguered state of education. Detractors say his drive to forge ahead is sometimes at others' expense. From a construction site behind him rises a \$4.5-million gym due to open next month. To Sillers, however, the gym is history. When he looks at it, he envisions the high school that this campus, which now goes only to eighth grade, might now accommodate with a gym in place.

"He's always two steps ahead," says Diane De Corpo Fuller, headmaster of St Mary's. "Because of his age, some people wrongly think he's out of touch, but he's not. He knows the pulse of the parents, of the kids, of the whole environment. He's still the one I go to for advice on tough questions."

Twice, De Corpo Fuller, who has worked with Sillers for 15 years, has stood with him on dirt lots that he promised, despite a lack of funds, would soon become schools. They did. By now, his knack for starting schools with no money is legendary.

"He's quite willing to take a lot of risk based on faith," says Ruben Ingram, a former superintendent of schools and the man Sillers has tapped to run his next project: Sillers College, which, if he gets his way, will open in Aliso Viejo in the fall. "Some of us more pragmatic types don't move until we have a strategic plan and the money. He moves from a different mind-set, which makes the rest of us look like sticks in the mud."

"When Noah started building his ark, people gathered and made fun of him too," says Sillers, who often talks in parables. "God has called me to do this, and people laugh when I start a school on faith. But they didn't laugh when my board [at St. Mary's] and I recently got a \$10.2-million bond for 30 years at 11/2% [interest]," he said, just a little smugly.

Apart from that bond, funding for his schools comes from private donations and loans from the diocese, which the schools repay in 15 years.

From the playground at St. Mary's, Sillers heads to his office, located in one of several temporary buildings on campus. A slight man with a demeanor reminiscent of that of famed UCLA Coach John Wooden, Sillers sits at his rather unseemly desk shuffling through papers looking, through large tortoiseshell glasses, for his "vision," his action plan.

It's written, sort of Ten Commandments style, on two large sheets

of construction paper. The words and pages are super-sized so he can read them. Diagnosed 20 years ago with macular degeneration, a progressive disease that erodes eyesight, Sillers doesn't let a little blindness get in his way.

On the pages he's outlined the three parcels of land he intends to buy to fulfill his next set of goals: land for a Sillers High School adjacent to the St. Mary's campus; land for Sillers College; and the property for an education-based retirement home. With his existing schools, these projects would complete his "cradle to grave" educational community.

"Mine is not a tiny vision," says Sillers. Coming from anyone else, these plans would have the hollow ping of a pipe dream, but Sillers' track record makes people take him seriously.

"I've asked God for nine more years. I don't know if he'll grant them, but that's what I'll need to finish my work here."

Born Ernest Dwyer Sillers in Nova Scotia in 1910, Sillers was the seventh of eight children. His mother was an Irish Anglican schoolteacher, his father a Scottish Baptist and the village smith, specializing in farm equipment. His parents regularly attended separate churches, and "they fought, but not about church," recalls Sillers. Looking back, Sillers sees that this split in his parents' beliefs and their tolerance actually prepared him for the broader vision he would ultimately have of religion: "You can't help but be what you're brought up to be." He overcame polio and Bell's palsy as a child; the vestiges of each betray themselves today in the slight droop of one eye, the shuffle in his step.

He dropped out of high school at 17, following his brother-in-law to Pasadena to work in a bank, but returned to Canada three years later to finish school. He was accepted "conditionally" to Gordon College in Boston, where he got mostly Ds his first semester. Eventually his grades turned to A's and Bs, and he went to the University of New Hampshire for a master's in philosophy, then to Cambridge Episcopal Seminary. He was ordained a priest in 1941. Along the way, he married Aldine Fosgate, a theology major who taught Sunday school and high school. Later she would set up the libraries at each of her husband's schools. The couple have no children.

His first parish in California was in Pico Rivera in 1956. It was so small that he had to work part time as a substitute teacher in the Whittier school district to make ends meet. There he picked up his teaching credential and a strong sense that schools could do a much

better job of preparing youths for the world. He helped form St. Mark's Church in Downey in 1959. Six years later he opened his first school there, serving as headmaster until 1975, when, at age 65, he retired and moved to Laguna Beach.

That same year, his bishop asked him if he would step in and temporarily conduct services for a newly formed church in San Juan Capistrano. St. Margaret's Episcopal Church was so new that parishioners gathered in homes. Though the church was barely established, Sillers sensed in it another opportunity to launch a church-affiliated school. He called a meeting at a local restaurant, inviting parents from the church and surrounding community to see if there was any interest. One hundred fifty parents showed up, and by the end of the evening all signed on to help. The school opened four years later, and Sillers' temporary stint turned into 12 years.

Sillers' next school, St. John's Episcopal School in Rancho Santa Margarita, opened in the following year, and today has 880 students, grades preschool through eighth.

While there, he had yet another idea for a school, one that extended beyond the Episcopal Church's ideas. "I wanted to enlarge my ministry, to draw children of all faiths," he says. Thus in 1994, at age 83, Sillers opened St. Mary's, his fourth school and the first to be non-church affiliated.

Though all his other schools accept children of all faiths, they are affiliated with an Episcopal church and are members of the National Assn. of Episcopal Schools. "The difference is important," says Sillers, who, though still a devout Episcopal, believes this school is more in line with the world.

"I wanted to bring together all families into the life of a community surrounding 'one holy catholic and apostolic church.' I want Baptists and Methodists, Catholics and Episcopalians, Muslims and Buddhists to live and work together and accept one another. That was a big change for me." The ecumenical school has a Protestant minister as co-chaplain and members of the Muslim and Jewish faiths on its board of directors.

"Ever since Jesus gathered his disciples and taught them, the church has become more and more disenfranchised," says Sillers. "That wasn't Jesus' intention."

Including all faiths in a school that emphasizes morals, academics and spirituality, he believes, is the best way to prepare youths for

a world that is moving toward greater globalism. "Nations will combine over the coming decades until the world is one. Other countries will join us in their defeats. This is the process of integration, which is good and from God. That's how he means it to be, in the schools and in the world," he says.

"Our country will only be as strong and secure as our leaders. We're in an age of technology, and our youth must learn to be very shrewd. Teachers are giving more time and attention to teaching technology and less time to the humanities, so we get human machines but no moral leaders. We have to teach both to have balance and security in society."

But not everyone, including the Episcopal Diocese, agrees with his methods.

"They were upset because he did things without talking to them," says Campaigne. "He just drove too fast. His attitude was: I'm building schools. You can come with me or not. I'm tired of fooling around."

In a frequently relayed story, Sillers drew criticism when he was starting St. Mary's and tapped some families and teachers from St. John's and St. George's Episcopal School in El Toro. "The church diocese and the other schools saw his recruitment efforts as deliberately undermining," says Campaigne, "but it wasn't that. It was Ern doing what he does. He was starting another school and talking it up."

That year, the Episcopal Diocese of Los Angeles called a meeting specifically to call Sillers on the carpet. Campaigne, who attended, remembers Sillers' deft handling of his foes. "Early in the meeting he said, 'I can't tell you how much I appreciate how you've gathered to acknowledge what I'm doing for education in Orange County.'" He disarmed them, and the intended scolding never took place.

Sillers downplays the rift, which has since been mended, though he acknowledges that when making a choice between helping children or pleasing the church, he sides with the kids. "I walk a fine line with the church," admits Sillers, who nonetheless received the title of honorary canon from the Episcopal Diocese of Los Angeles in 1980. "I'm a maverick. I do what's best for the children. If I were active in the church trying to climb the ladder, I'd be in trouble. But I'm retired. My pension is secure. I don't have to play by all the rules."

Since retiring, Sillers receives an annual income of \$50,000 from

secured pensions. In addition, the board of directors of St. Mary's has voted to pay him a salary of \$48,000 until his death. For the school, he works on fund-raising and strategic planning. He earns nothing from the other schools he's founded.

To ensure that his mission continues, Sillers now plans to educate the educators. If all goes as planned, Sillers College will open next September and offer a master's degree in education and a state teaching credential. Until Sillers secures a separate building, which he hopes to do, classes will meet in the evenings on the campuses of St. Mary's and St. Margaret's. For the college to open on time, Ingram says, they need to raise \$500,000 in the next three months. Once the master's and credentialing programs are underway, Sillers plans to expand the college to offer a four-year bachelor's degree in education.

Then he plans to educate and motivate retirees, who, he feels, don't do enough with their talent. At his urging, the Episcopal Diocese bought a retirement community called the Covington, now under construction next door to the St. Mary's campus. Sillers has already purchased a condo there for himself and his wife. There, in a state of quasi-retirement, he plans to hold weekly seminars to inspire retirees to go back into the community and help. He also hopes to hold specific courses for retired priests and teachers to urge them to help children and those working in schools.

And after that? On to "makeup school," he says. "So often the lives of young children are snuffed out through accidents and illness before they've had time to prepare themselves," he says. "There are a host of kids in paradise who need makeup courses to become angels. There's work to be done in the community of saints, so my work goes on and on."

PHOTO: Children greet Father Ernest Sillers as he visits the playground at St. Mary's and All Angels School in Aliso Viejo.

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PHOTO: Father Ernest Sillers, a retired Episcopal priest, speaks to seventh-graders at St. Mary's and All Angels, one of the schools he founded.

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RETIREMENT