Dorm doors close at Covington School

Michelle Krupa
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COVINGTON — The boy had hoped that when he became a father his own son would live there one day, just as he did and as his father had.

Decades from now, he figured, a member of the Gillespie family's next generation would make his home in the high school dormitory in Covington's piney woods, checking the same wall clocks that measured his days and his father's three decades ago.

William Gillespie, just 14 years old, said recently that he had wanted his own son to live in the dorm at Saint Paul's School. He wanted, years from now, for his child to walk those halls and to join the brotherhood that has grown there for nearly a century.

“My dad, when I came, he showed me his old room, and mine was right next to it. I thought that was cool,” said Gillespie, of Lafayette. “And then I was thinking, that after I accomplished everything I want to accomplish, that I would probably send my own son to Saint Paul's.

It was the institution's cornerstone, with the majority of Saint Paul's students living on campus, many of them having chosen the school because of its boarding option.

But this year, with Saint Paul's student population at roughly 200, Bulliard said in a recent interview. That has made it tougher, he said, to raise dozens of young men in close quarters.

Dorm staffers have had to deal increasingly with learning and behavior disorders — including attention deficit and hyperactivity — and with substance abuse, which has left less time to serve educational and emotional needs, Bulliard said.

Increased legal liability also has been an issue, as well as overhead costs that do not drop with dwindling enrollment.

“Have you ever tried to raise teenage boys?” he asked. “I certainly would be naive if I didn't say that liability is one of the factors that matters to us, but I don’t want this to be read strictly as an economic decision.

“This is a sad time for us. We're just quietly trying to deal with the loss.”

In Saint Paul's earliest days, boarders lived in wooden buildings, where they slept in cavernous rooms lined with bunk beds and patrolled by two Christian Brothers, who slept behind curtains at opposite corners.

“Sometimes, the young men would lie in their beds at night and stick their arms down and roll marbles,” said Brother Alfred Bultz, who arrived at Saint Paul's in 1955. “With the long, wooden floors, they would roll clear to the other end of the room.”

By the 1960s, the school had leveled the original dorms and converted Dixon Hall, a classroom building, into living quarters; it burned to the ground in 1980. In addition, it had built two brick, air-conditioned dorms: Benilde Hall and LaSalle Hall, a two-story facility that served as the dorm until last month.

After decades of declining enrollment, only 35 of this year's Saint Paul's pupils lived in LaSalle Hall, which can house roughly 200, Bulliard said. Of those, 18 were international students, including a handful of Latin American eighth-graders who planned to attend the school only for one year to learn English.

When dorm director Rick Mauldin gathered those pupils in March to tell them they would be Saint Paul's last boarders, it felt like a funeral, some boys said later.

“Nobody died, but something is dying: the dorm program,” Hans Gurtner, a 16-year-old from Bogalusa, recalled Mauldin saying.