Students and staff gather on the lawn outside the Abessinio Building to celebrate the achievement of university status.

The Mirenda Center for Sport, Spirituality and Character Development opened in October 2009.

The 2009 men’s ice hockey team won the NCAA Division III national championship.

Men were a rare sight on campus until 1980.

John Cardinal Krol came to campus in 1985 to bless the new Life Center.
Neumann celebrated by awarding honorary degrees to Bishop Timothy Senior, auxiliary bishop of Philadelphia, and Sr. Esther Anderson, OSF, congregational minister of the Sisters of St. Francis of Philadelphia. Bishop Senior delivered the seventh annual Dr. Dorothy A.P. Leunissen Lecture on the topic of vocations, an address inspired by Pope Benedict XVI’s designation of 2010 as the Year of the Priest.

The enormous achievements of 2009 were still fresh in the minds of students, faculty and staff. One could almost be forgiven for thinking that most of Neumann’s progress had occurred in that calendar year.

In March of 2009, the University (then College) won its first NCAA championship as the men’s ice hockey team captured the national title with a 4-1 victory over Gustavus Adolphus in Lake Placid, New York. The very next month, on April 24, the Pennsylvania Department of Education granted Neumann university status, the culmination of a process that lasted more than two years.

According to Dr. Rosalie Mirenda, Neumann’s president, “University status is the culmination of Neumann’s transformation. It will be a catalyst for enhancing scholarship, research and service to our community. At the same time, Neumann’s commitment to its mission, core values and personal attention to our students will remain the same.”

Finally, in October of last year, the University opened and blessed the Mirenda Center for Sport, Spirituality and Character Development. Designed to be more than an athletic center, the building uses exhibits and storytelling to provide a new perspective on sports, one that goes beyond the obvious element of competition to address the myriad ways in which students learn life lessons and develop character through athletics.

Neumann’s journey, however, began long before 2009. When Our Lady of Angels College opened its doors in September of 1965, the total enrollment was 115 women students and there were seven faculty members. The capacity of Bachmann Main Building (so named in 2002) was 1,500 — more than 13 times the student population.

The enrollment in 2010, as Neumann University celebrates its 45th anniversary, stands at 3,099 and includes 2,012 full-time undergraduate students. There are more than 750 resident students and 91 full-time faculty, enlivening a campus that has grown to 68 acres and ten buildings.

The Early Years

The establishment of the University was the culmination of decades of planning by the Sisters of St. Francis of Philadelphia, who have guided its mission and strategic growth ever since. In fact, the Sisters had been providing Catholic education in the Franciscan tradition high on their hill in Aston since 1928, when they established in the convent a “house of studies” that served as a Villanova University Extension Center for decades.

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In order to meet the growing needs of education for both their order and those students whom they taught, the Sisters began to contemplate constructing a college on their grounds. On September 3, 1959, Mother Everilda Flynn, OSF, penned a letter to The Catholic University of America to inquire about the possibility of starting a college for the purpose of educating the Sisters. Under the direction of Mother Mary Agnes MacIntyre, OSF, Superior General, Mother Everilda worked to create this affiliation. On August 10, 1962, The Catholic University approved the proposal and established Our Lady of Angels Institute. The Sisters were one step closer to establishing their college.

The name of the Institute reflected that of their convent and honored their tradition. The first church that St. Francis built in Assisi was St. Mary of the Angels, the inspiration for the name of both the existing Mother House and the college to come.

In the two years prior to the groundbreaking on May 17, 1964, the Sisters, who did not want to borrow the money to build their college, decided to raise the money themselves. They solicited funds from the parishes in which they taught, held bazaars and yard sales, and even recorded an album of their favorite sacred and secular songs to sell for $5 each. Sr. Kathleen Parisi, OSF, remembers the many weekends of selling hamburgers, hot dogs, ice cream and snow cones in fields that are now student parking lots, each sale inching the college toward completion.

Finally, their dream became a reality and less than 16 months after groundbreaking, in September 1965, Our Lady of Angels College opened its doors with Mother Everilda Flynn as its first president. One of the memorable moments from that first fall semester was the transferring of more than 23,000 volumes from the convent to the new College library — via a human conveyor belt made up of two hundred women.

The College continued to grow through the 1970s, with two very significant additions during this time. In September 1971, the College launched a program for adult women. Deferred Opportunity Education (DOE) evolved into Adult Initiative Maximized (AIM), now known as Liberal Studies. This program allows adult students to earn their bachelor’s degree in an accelerated format, using 6-credit evening courses that meet one night per week. Also in 1971, the administration noticed that women needed safe, professional daycare for their children while they attended classes. A child care center opened on the third floor of Bachmann Main Building and soon evolved into the current Child Development Center (1973) accommodating pre-school children.
The Transition to Neumann

In 1980, the Board of Trustees approved the name change from Our Lady of Angels to Neumann. The name Neumann College seemed fitting given the significant role Bishop John Neumann had in assisting the order of Sisters of St. Francis of Philadelphia in their early days. Sister Margarella O’Neill, OSF, the College’s third president, explained, “Naming the College after a man was also a natural because we began to admit men to the College in all programs that same year.”

Over the years, the curriculum at Neumann continued to expand with both graduate and undergraduate degrees. In 1983, the first graduate program, Pastoral Care and Counseling, was approved and led the way for five new graduate programs: education, nursing, physical therapy, sport management, and strategic leadership. The undergraduate curriculum has blossomed and now includes 20 majors, the most recent additions being Athletic Training and Criminal Justice.

During the 1980s and early 1990s, Neumann established more intercollegiate athletic teams, created the Theater Ensemble, joined the Southeastern Pennsylvania Consortium for Higher Education, and built the Life Center (1985) with money raised by the Forward Fund Campaign.

As the College continued to grow, so did the need for residence on campus. After an intensive feasibility study, the Board of Trustees voted in 1994 to approve the construction of a Living and Learning Center residence on campus. With the donation of 7.1 acres by the Sisters of St. Francis of Philadelphia, the College was poised for the next phase of its history.

Strategic Growth

When the first residence opened in the fall of 1997, the state-of-the-art building housed 177 residents and transformed campus life. The construction of Living and Learning Center II (1999) and III (2002) continued the expansion. There are now more than 750 resident students.

Of course, with the influx of undergraduates came the need for more student services, more clubs and organizations, more opportunities for campus ministry, more academic programs, more artistic and athletic outlets. At last count, the University boasted more than 20 campus organizations, nine performing arts groups, 19 NCAA Division III teams, and dozens of regular religious services and social outreach programs.

The source of many capital projects, programmatic improvements and student scholarships is On the Wings of Angels, the first comprehensive campaign in Neumann’s history, a five-year effort which concluded on June 30, 2003 and which raised $10.3 million, surpassing its $9 million goal by fourteen percent.

In September 2003, the University dedicated and blessed the Rocco A. Abessinio Building, a five-story structure built in 1988. It is named after a 1979 graduate of Neumann (then Our Lady of Angels), whose generosity allowed the University to acquire the former home of Catholic Health Initiatives from the Sisters of St. Francis of Philadelphia. His gift is the largest ever given to the University by an individual, and the Sisters facilitated the sale to support their higher education ministry.

The next step on the journey is Homecoming 2010, scheduled for October 14-17, when the Neumann family will celebrate the blessing of St. John Neumann Circle, its statues, and the many new gardens that have appeared because of the generosity of friends, foundations and the Sisters of St. Francis of Philadelphia.

Mother Agnes McIntyre, OSF, breaks ground for Bachmann Main Building.

Cheering for the Knights . . .
or was it the Nikes?