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CHRIS MACHIAN/THE WORLD-HERALD

Rita Ryan with her fourth-year Latin students at Omaha Central High. Only nine Nebraska schools still teach Latin. But in those schools, there seems to be quite a lot of life left in the so-called dead language. Ryan, 63, decided to end her 42-year career only after being assured that Central would fill her spot.

Dead or alive, Latin is still a wanted language

By *Erin Grace*
WORLD-HERALD COLUMNIST

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Deep in enemy territory, the Goddess of War leads me down the ancient hallway of the school where she has reigned for 42 years.

Called Miss Ryan by mere mortals, the Goddess, today dressed in a Kelly green plaid jacket and black skirt, shows off some antiques and the spoils of battle.

Here is a Latin club record so old it bears the name of Omaha High School, which preceded the name Central High. Here's a faded copy of a definitive work on Troy, by German archaeologist Heinrich Shliemann.

And here, motions the proud Goddess, in this eight-foot-tall trophy case, shine the triumphs of many, many matchups between the Latin clubs of high schools throughout the city.

I peer inside and spot it right away: the trophy from 1991, when Central seized victory from my Marian team in the Junior Classical League's annual Latin contest, called *certamen*. I can't help but admire (and sort of envy) the enemy, until a voice rings in my

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This is a first. I found myself humming, "It's starting to look a lot like Christmas" in mid-April.

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memory. It is the voice of my own Latin teacher, the late Sister Mary Rosaria Edney, who competed hard against the Goddess.

“*Et tu, Erin?*” the voice says.

I take a minute to explain to the Ghost of Sister Rosaria that I’m no turncoat. That even though I’m at Central today, I’ll be at Marian the following day as I visit two veteran Latin teachers in the waning days of their careers.



I want to know whether their pending retirements sound the death knell for Latin education at these two schools — which are among a mere nine high schools in the state that still offer study of the ancient tongue.

According to the State Department of Education, Latin is offered only in the Omaha metro area, at Bellevue East, Bellevue West, Brownell-Talbot, Central, Creighton Prep, Marian, Millard North, Millard West and Westside.

Creighton University has decided to end its secondary teaching endorsement for Latin teachers because so few Creighton students seek that certificate. That will leave the University of Nebraska-Lincoln as the only university in the state to offer the endorsement.

Once a staple in American education, the study of Latin has slipped like a loose toga.

Students have long shown more interest in “modern” languages like Spanish and French. Mandarin Chinese has made its entree into some Omaha schools, competing hard for some of the same students who might otherwise be translating Cicero and learning *amo, amas, amat*.

Finding teachers can be as difficult as finding students. When a Latin teacher shared by Duchesne Academy and Elkhorn Mount Michael left two years ago, Latin left those schools.

Martha Habash, associate professor of classics at Creighton University, said Latin study is “still very strong” in Omaha.

Habash makes the same case that Sister Rosaria and countless other Latin aficionados have made for studying the language:

- » It teaches you more about English, which owes half its vocabulary to Latin.
- » It can be the best preparation for a career in the sciences — Habash said classical languages majors at Creighton have the best record of getting students into medical school of any academic majors.
- » And its rigor can sharpen the mind.

“I always tell my own students that learning their own language well is probably the most useful thing they can do,” Habash said. “Employers want people who can communicate well. Studying Latin teaches them great skills — they can look at something critically, analyze it and then solve problems.”

Creighton Prep has enough Latin students —187 — to warrant two teachers, including Mark Haynes, who isn't willing to write Latin's epitaph.

Latin, said Haynes, “will always be an indispensable language for scholars and anyone interested in the history of ideas.”

In other words, to borrow from Monty Python, Latin is not dead yet!

Here's how undead it is at Central. Rita Ryan, age 63, decided to end her 42-year Latin-teaching career only after she was sure Central would fill her spot. Central has 120

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students enrolled in Latin.

OPS hasn't made its hiring decision yet but is looking at several candidates, including a Latin scholar whose voice mail is in Latin. In June, Ryan will depart on her 25th trip to Italy, her 15th with students eager to visit Rome.

And at Marian, 100 students are scheduled to take Latin in the fall, when longtime religion teacher Mark Koesters takes over for Mr. DiMauro, age 76.

Al DiMauro had retired from teaching Latin at Northwest in 1995. Marian lured him out of retirement in 1996, two years after Sister Rosaria died.

He was supposed to stay for only a couple of years. The former Nebraska Teacher of the Year and Northwest High Teacher of the Year is also an actor. He directed Marian plays and, for 20 years, played Jacob Marley's ghost in the Omaha Community Playhouse's "A Christmas Carol."

The two teachers followed different roads to Rome. Ryan, mesmerized by the ancient world, studied Latin and Greek at Creighton University and was hired to fill one of three Latin teaching spots then offered at Omaha Central. DiMauro had planned to be a Catholic priest, leaving Tech High when it dropped Latin and transferring to the former Cathedral High.

They found in the rigid, rules-bound language a wonderful opportunity to teach geography, history and literature — and to have fun with it.

Ryan's goal in the classroom was to entertain herself first and educate second.

"Translating Cicero all day is not much fun," she admitted.

Ryan organized huge Latin banquets, helped build impressive Latin club homecoming parade floats, assigned tedious — but cool-looking — projects and competed hard in the annual *certamen*, which involves a broad knowledge of Roman history and Latin understanding. She also oversaw Central's Junior Classical League and Student Democrats. In 1990, Ryan earned an Alice Buffett Outstanding Teacher Award.

DiMauro has incorporated some lighter Latinized texts. Like "Green Eggs & Ham." And "Peter Rabbit."

"*Sed Petrus qui erat improbissimus statim ad hortum Domini McGregor concurrir et se sub portam pressit,*" one student read aloud.

"This is really hard Latin, isn't it?" quipped DiMauro.

"This is so-o-o much better than 'The Aeneid,'" whispered senior Molly Clow, 18, who wants to go to medical school and sees Latin as a great primer for all the anatomical jargon she'll have to learn.

"He's hilarious," she says of DiMauro. "He's a great teacher. He teaches us a lot more than Latin."

Students seem to share the same opinion of Ryan. Art teacher Kathryn Schroeder (Central 1999) gushed about her Latin class days with Miss Ryan and said she still has her Latin club T-shirt. One student in Latin IV, a baseball player, asked Ryan to throw out the first pitch at a game.

I think Sister Rosaria would be glad to know that Latin will go on after the Goddess leaves and after DiMauro retires for the second time.

OWH Columnists



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For all the hours we spent cramming Roman trivia into our brains to compete against Central, I think she'd have to agree with the poster in Miss Ryan's room.

It reads: "LATIN IS NOT DEAD. LATIN IS IMMORTAL."

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John Anthony Brodston ·  Top Commenter · Gretna, Nebraska

A great story. It brings back the days from long ago. I was an altar boy (no choice in the matter) which require boredom. I took two years of Latin at the old Ryan High in the mid 60's because, at the time, I had entertainec have a working knowledge of both Greek and Latin. I also enjoyed reading Virgil , Pliny the Elder and Tacitus wi battleax nuns who taught it and I was all too happy to switch over to French and Spanish which I have found r LA, Denver and South Omaha). A good grade in Organic Chemistry is still the key to medical school althou... [Se](#)

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Daniel J. Daly · Omaha, Nebraska

Thanks, Erin, for a great article.

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