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A chapel and school were part of the Sisters of Notre Dame orphanage in St. Agatha, which grew into kidsLINK.

Orphanage alumni have warm memories

By Charlotte Prong Parkhill, Record staff

ST. AGATHA — John Zapalac stayed at the Sisters of Notre Dame orphanage for just one year, back in 1955.

But he has such strong memories of his time there, he travelled more than 4,000 kilometres to attend the 150th anniversary of the St. Agatha institution.

"I wouldn't have missed this for the world," said Zapalac, who is now the chief of police in Woodlake, Calif.

Over the years, the orphanage has evolved into kidsLINK, which provides services for children with emotional, social and mental health concerns.

The sisters left in 1988 and the facility is now used as a residential treatment centre and special needs school.

More than 150 people attended the anniversary celebration yesterday at kidsLINK headquarters in St. Agatha.

The event included a children's art show, dedication of a memorial garden and the launch of a new fundraising campaign.

Zapalac's father died shortly after the family emigrated from Czechoslovakia.

On her own and unable to speak English, his mother, at the suggestion of the sisters, allowed three of her four boys to be cared for by the orphanage.

"They took us at a time when we had nothing," said Zapalac, who entered the orphanage when he was age six. "Had they not nourished us and loved us, who knows what would have happened?"

After a year, the boys went home to their mother, but main-

tained strong ties to Notre Dame.

"Despite the fact that we were poor, we felt rich because of the support of this community," he said.

Zapalac's mother moved the family to southern California in 1964, though one of his brothers later returned to Kitchener. The boys never forgot the care they received from Sister Alfreda, one of the nuns who ran the orphanage.

"We had hard times but I loved every minute of it," said Sister Alfreda, who sometimes had as many as 48 children in her care.

"And I really enjoy meeting them again. They've turned out beautifully, and I'm proud of every one of them."

Bill Spelker didn't want to come to the orphanage after his father's death in 1964.

But after living there for two years, he didn't want to leave. Spelker reminisced with friends he was shocked to find recognized him after more than 40 years.

"We were bad kids," he said. "We'd go up on the roof and smoke cigarettes — lit from prayer candles."

Spelker said he'll always be grateful for the patience of the nuns and the education he received.

Zapalac said he shares the story of his childhood with as many kids as he can. In his line of work, he deals with disadvantaged kids and gang members all the time.

"Despite those challenges, you have to believe," he tells them. "There is hope."

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