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## Farewell to the Beach

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# Farewell to the Beach

After 56 years, the Spiritans say farewell to Neil McNeil High School



Gerald FitzGerald CSSp, Principal 1975–1980, Neil McNeil High School

## Fond memories of other days

Looking down the arches of the years can be a bitter-sweet experience. For me, however, the sweet memories far outnumber the bitter ones.

Is it really a century ago that the Archbishop of Toronto had his summer home on a large property south of Kingston Road between Victoria Park Avenue and Courcellette Drive? The Beach was cottage country then and a big water park existed on Queen Street just south of this site. Kingston Road still had a boardwalk so that pedestrians were not forced to walk in the muddy street.

Fast forward a quarter century and De La Salle Reform School for boys had been built on the property — well away from the city and its temptations. The Beach was still bucolic even though beautiful homes had replaced many of the summer cottages of earlier days. The local boys learned their hockey and handball in the Reform School facilities. There were no objections from the neighbours. Apparently NIMBY had not yet been invented.

Fast forward again to 1958 when the Spiritans acquired the site and, in collaboration with the Archdiocese, built a high school and a residence for the priests who were teaching there.

### Two Spiritan waves

The Spiritans are a missionary Order, founded in France in 1703. Within fifty years they were established in New France and their story is an important chapter in the early history of Canada. Education was one of the main tools they chose for evangelization.

In the 1950's a second Spiritan wave appeared on these shores, this time via Malton Airport. A group of priests came straight from Ireland and planted roots in St. John's parish. I was one of this second wave and I look back with fond memories to the fifty-five years that are now water under the bridge. My memories are subjective, but totally honest, even if tinted at times by rose-coloured glasses.

Like all immigrants I suffered from serious cultural shock. I did not realize this for twenty years or more because the effect of all shock is to minimize the awareness of events taking place.

My first impressions of Canada were the boys in their pristine uniforms arriving at their recently founded school. My only image of North American kids had been gleaned from the movies — bobbysoxers, soda fountains, Mickey Rooney, crew cuts, girl friends — glib and slick and independent. How false this image proved to be. What a pleasant surprise these Neil McNeil boys were for me!

Every now and then I take a few minutes and delve into one of the early yearbooks: "How he has changed." "I wonder where they are now." "Did we do that then?" "Didn't he look young then." Over the years many great young men have graced our halls and classrooms. At Neil, we are proud of our Neilers. Granted our buildings, our plant and our facilities provoke at times comments both humorous and cynical, but "a healthy mind in a healthy body" is a matter of much concern.

— Peter Fleming CSSp, Principal 1980–1991



### "You talked to us and were always fair."

Of course they were boys, no different from their counterparts in Spiritan schools in Ireland and Trinidad where I had previously taught. They were noisy, rough, not over-given to academic work. But they were friendly, funny, great company and very forgiving of the idiosyncrasies of this

# Neil McNeil High School

bunch of robed priests with thick Irish brogues, who ran an Irish school with a Dean of Discipline and a Dean of Studies with weekly marks for academics, conduct and deportment! And a marks book to be signed by a parent or, it was whis-

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In Maroon and Grey they all looked the same to us. The inner city mingled with the wealthy suburbs like nowhere else in Toronto.

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pered, sometimes by the student himself. St. Mike's it wasn't! Recently I was talking to a retired lawyer who was in one of my first classes and asked him "How did you put up with us?" His reply was "Because you talked to us and were always fair."

It must be remembered that we knew nothing of their backgrounds. Each of us arrived as a *tabula rasa*. We did not

realize yet that Neil, as it was affectionately called, was built in a unique location. We had boys from very wealthy homes in The Beach and Fallingbrook areas as well as students from Cabbagetown and the inner city. Many of them were the children of recent immigrants. In Maroon and Grey they all looked the same to us. The inner city mingled with the wealthy suburbs like nowhere else in Toronto. The son of a neurosurgeon could well be sharing a locker with a boy whose family were on welfare.

**"Father, have you never heard of the Maple Leafs?"**

And we learned so much from them. A school had to have hockey teams. What was hockey? "Father, have you never heard of the Maple Leafs?" Within a year, all eight of us priests were huddled around our small black and white TV on Saturday nights, cheering and groaning as our heroes Dave, Frank, Red, Johnny, The Chief, Bobby and Tim, led by Punch, took on the Habs, the Bruins, the Rangers and other



# Neil McNeil High School



“What I remember with most pleasure is the friendships formed, many of which endure. These were with both teachers and boys. A school is the quintessential people place, where young adults are emerging into the full maturity which will carry them through life. It was a privilege to be part of that experience, to accompany them and even to help guide them on that journey. For that I am grateful.”

— John Geary CSSp, Principal 1968–1975

hated foes. How quickly we learned the ways of our new country. And how soon we came to love it. Within a few years we had become Canadians with Irish accents.

And a school had to have sock-hops. “What is a sock-hop?” “Father, do you not know anything?” Here we met the female of the species for the first time. Soon a bond grew between staff and students at Neil and Notre Dame. Friendships and marriages were forged which have survived the passage of time. We began by teaching students, then officiating at their marriages, then baptizing their children, and finally educating their sons. Time is so cyclical. We became chaplains to the two Notre Dame convents, one on Kingston Road, the other on Waverleigh Boulevard. CND and CSSp bonds remain especially dear.

## “Aw! come on, Father. You’re havin’ me on.”

Slowly we got to know the parents of the boys, especially those who were our Beach neighbours. A month after arrival, I was invited to Thanksgiving Dinner by a family on Bracken Road. (“What is Thanksgiving?” “Aw! come on, Father. You’re havin’ me on.”) Replete in black robe, a black rope/cincture around my waist, I knocked at the door to discover a Canadian home environment as well as cranberry sauce, pumpkin pie, corn on the cob. I knew how the Pilgrim Fathers felt. And yet, bonds were forged that night that last to this day. I have baptized their

children and grandchildren, officiated at their marriages, attended their parties, felt their sorrows, buried their dead and will meet the first great grandchild at dinner next Sunday.

## “Do you remember me, Father?”

I did not adopt Canada. Canada adopted me and all my fellow Spiritans. How deep our roots have grown in so short a time! I meet past students, former parents, fellow Neil staff everywhere I go. This Irish tree took root in Canadian soil. In malls, theatres, churches, cottage country — the wonderful question “Do you remember me, Father? I was in your homeroom in 1972. This is my wife. Do you remember the time that...?” The formula is always the same and each time it is a wonderful experience.

I am so proud that Neil McNeil, has become an institution in East Toronto, South Scarborough and, above all, the Beach area.

## And a school had to have sock-hops.

### “What is a sock-hop?”

### “Father, do you not know anything?”

I am proud that the school we founded has one of the highest academic records in Toronto today as evaluated by the Fraser Institute. I am proud of its sports tradition in hockey and a variety of disciplines. I am proud of its alumni in all the professions and arts. I am proud of the eleven priests, including one bishop, who attended Neil and are serving in the Archdiocese, including the beloved pastor of St. John’s on Kingston Road. Not to mention a Provincial Superior of the Canadian Jesuits and a Superior General of the Redemptorist Order. I am flattered that no other school in Toronto has produced so many teachers. Is it possible that we portrayed an image of a fulfilling profession?

“What has started these ruminations of an old man?” you may ask. Well after over fifty years of active presence in the area, the Spiritans have sold their school and property to the Catholic School Board and have moved the survivors of the early years to a retirement home off Bayview Avenue. And this year marks the retirement of the Notre Dame Sisters from their school and convent at 750 Kingston Road. For the first time since the Christian Brothers arrived over ninety years ago, there are no religious sisters, brothers or priests serving the people of this area of the city. I like to think that the three Congregations — The Notre Dame Sisters, the De La Salle Brothers and the Spiritan Fathers — contributed significantly to the youth of the area. And now — our work is done. Surely this marks the end of an era. ■

# Farewell to the Beach

After 73 years, the Sisters of CND say farewell to Notre Dame High School



Lucille Corrigan CND, Principal 1968 –1986, Notre Dame High School

## From student to teacher to principal

In September, 1948, I met the CNDs and The Beach, and my life has never been quite the same since! Hidden on a residential street in the now “Upper Beach”, was an old above-ground church hall, a dusty tennis court and a few portables on an acre of land. That was the 7-year-old Notre Dame High School that would become my Alma Mater. Except for the Physical Education teacher the staff was made up entirely of Sisters from the Congregation of Notre Dame.

Staff and students welcomed us so warmly we wondered how they had ever managed without us! Staff seemed not to have heard of generation gaps; whatever our gift, it belonged to all! Looking back, I am amazed at what they accomplished through sheer determination and trust in God.

Grades 9 and 10 were funded by a cash-strapped School Board; the Sisters collaborated with the Archdiocese in providing the three senior grades in those early years, before taking complete responsibility for them in the 60’s. Those teaching in Board classes agreed to receive a percentage of their salary, allowing the Board to make use of the rest for the needs in the entire system. The pastor, Monsignor Denis O’Connor, told us that story, hinting that the Sisters might not mention it.

I believe that our sensitivity to that reality had a great deal to do with some of the obvious enduring characteristics of the school community: a close family spirit; genuine gratitude for what we received; a fierce sense of pride in our school; an affirming relationship among students that provided a comfortable climate for growing up and developing faith, convictions and leadership as young women. We rejoiced that fall in the turning of the sod for our new building, which would be financed by an Archdiocesan educational funding drive and be ready for occupancy early in the next year.

### Welcomed to the Beach

The Beach of then, recognizable today only by Alma’s Florist and Randall’s Book Store, welcomed us as we sacrificed our homework time in favour of visiting all the neighbouring vendors asking for donations for our annual Hallowe’en Carnival. They handed us everything from shoe laces to a floor lamp!

As the new building offered such luxuries as a cafeteria and a gymnasium, we soon enjoyed friendly rivalry in sports across the city, savouring for weeks a rare victory over St. Joseph’s or The Abbey! We held our own in the Archdiocesan Religious Education Examinations, and marched proudly in the Rosary Sunday Holy Hour Rally at Exhibition Park. Our gym was transformed into a fancy ballroom twice a year for the Wine and White Ball and graduation formal. At some time in the winter we celebrated a school holiday ice skating at the St. John’s Training School rink down on the southeast corner of Victoria Park and Kingston Road.

Through it all, we claimed as ours St. John’s parish. It was where we held our school Masses and where we graduated.



# Notre Dame High School



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No one could mistake our three priorities of prayer and community living, overflowing into and supporting our apostolic work as Catholic educators.

Its priests were guest lecturers in our Religious Education classes in Grade 13. It welcomed us at morning Mass where we were especially visible in Lent and at exam time, and for drop-in visits during the day.

In the fall of my final year at Notre Dame, the Sisters held a formal blessing of their newly built convent across the yard at 750 Kingston Road. Our Grade 13 class was honoured to be part of this. By the end of that year my own call to religious life was clarified. Little did I know that eight years later I would return to live in this house until it closed, and teach on that school staff until after funding arrived!

## On staff

And so, August 22, 1961, saw me back fresh from profession of perpetual vows as a Sister of the CND, and newly missioned to teach at Notre Dame High School — a mandate that would cover the next twenty-five years, as I went from seven years in the classroom to one year as vice-principal to eighteen years as principal.

1961 was barely pre-Vatican II. The convent still housed over thirty Sisters in small simply furnished rooms with cupboards that comfortably held two habits and a winter cape. Life was simple! Living was structured with grand silence reigning from Night Prayer until after Mass the next morning. Meditation, spiritual reading, prayer, reflection, and common recreation each found its place in the day. Rank in age of profession was honoured and bells were a familiar sound. Structured though they were, these were good years. No one could mistake our three priorities of prayer and community living, overflowing into and supporting our apostolic work as Catholic educators.

To everyone's delight in 1958 the Spiritan Fathers had opened Neil McNeil High School just down the road, and from then until the closing of the convent, they provided us with fifty-five years of superb chaplaincy service, loyal friendship and an inspiring example of professional commitment.

# Notre Dame High School

## Vatican II changes

Quite suddenly, our now newest saint, Pope John XXIII, convoked and guided the Second Vatican Council, and the fresh air challenge to revitalization blew through the very life and structures of our Church. By the end of 1968, when our own CND Extraordinary General Chapter convened, much had been done to focus on the essentials in an apostolic religious community and to let go many accidentals that we had added over the centuries. Among the most visible changes were the return to our baptismal names, the change to garb that separated us less from the people we serve, and a far less institutionalized pattern of life.

## Extending government funding

Huge changes marked our whole western society in the late 60's and in the 70's and the issue of balancing freedom and responsibility found its way into every classroom. At the same time our government answered with a resounding, "No!", Ontario Catholic students gathered in Maple Leaf Gardens

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formally requesting extension of funding to the end of Grade 13. The premier had been heard to say days earlier, "This is coming from the teachers, not the students. The students don't give a damn!" The premier was met by thousands of uniformed students, each wearing a button that read, "I give a damn!" The long haul years beginning with that "No!" in 1971 lasted until June 12, 1984's surprise announcement of funding.

In spite of turbulent waters on all sides, those were great years to be at Notre Dame. The Parents' Guild organized its 50/50 draw; the lay staff held an awesome bazaar; the students sold World's Finest; and the CND community directed back to the private school the salary earned by its members in the Grade 9 and 10 section. It was everyone's way of saying, "I give a damn!"

The credit system with all its levels replaced the existing curriculum and courses abounded. The school continued to grow from the 860 that had necessitated the building of O'Connor Hall in 1963-64 to an all time high of 1111 in the early 80's. Somewhat reluctantly, teachers and students



Photo: Beach Metro Community News

A lasting memorial to the Notre Dame Sisters.

accepted as a blessing the space St. John's School had made available on their third and second floor. Nobody was turned away from the school they wanted to attend.

## Moving on

In 1982 Marguerite Bourgeoys, foundress of the Congregation of Notre Dame, was canonized by Pope John Paul II, and our joy knew no bounds. In 1984 full funding was announced to begin one year at a time starting with Grade 11 in September. As students moved into the first funded Grade 13 year, I moved on to be founding principal of St. Patrick Catholic Secondary School, and later principal of Monsignor Fraser College, but home was still 750 Kingston Rd. Province and local leadership both claimed my first years of retirement, followed by four years at another house, and back to "750" in 2008 to be in solidarity with those who would experience the reality of downsizing toward which we were moving. On May 9, 2013, two of us moved to Scarborough, leaving only the two who would officially turn the key in the lock at the end of August. It was only a change of address ... or was it? 53 years in the Beach and in St. John's Parish, 48 years at 750 Kingston Road, and 30 years at Notre Dame High School! At Scarborough Retirement Residence with daily Mass in house and plenty of freedom to come and go, I continue to be involved in the same kind of volunteer outreach as before. In these new days of opportunity and challenge in my life as a CND, I welcome the rich memories of the past with a grateful smile. They are God's reminder of his presence with me now! ■