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Home and Away

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Remembering Father Graham

Dan Proctor, Student Council President, Neil McNeil Class of '76

I am very fortunate to have regular contact with at least forty-five of my high school classmates from thirty-five years ago. Within hours of receiving the news of Father Graham's passing, I couldn't get over the exchange of emails between us relaying our memories of this man.

Father Graham taught us Mathematics in Grades 11 and 12, and Algebra and Calculus in Grade 13. We were the Neil boys, but he always addressed us as "men". Being a faculty member, he was part of the Neil discipline, but his was never punitive, onerous or intimidating. Without ever using a harsh tone, his form of discipline was expressed in what he expected us to be: gentlemanly, orderly, and of course ... mathematical.

He was a smoker back then, and we marvel now that during class he could balance a lit cigarette on the edge of his desk, perched over the wastebasket to catch any fallen ashes. Only infrequently would he pass by his desk after walking about the room, to have a puff. And then, again, perfectly re-balance the cigarette back on the desk. It must have been the math.

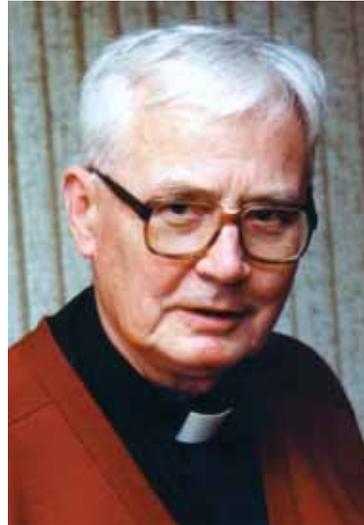
He was a fair teacher. Hard, but fair. With his chalk-covered fingers, or chalk dust on his clothing, he often walked around the classroom between our desks as we were completing tests and exams. Some teachers might think he was just supervising a particular exam. However he usually had a bible in his hands during these times. Some said he was praying for us to be honest; others that he was praying for us to pass his exam; still others that he was just praying for the world at large.

Mr. O'Neill, another faculty member, told me that he often had our class after Fr. Graham's math class. The students would present to his room holding their heads in dread for the 50% they received on an exam. I suggested that their behaviour might have been because their brains had been worked more than usual.

Another of my classmates told me that on parents' night, Fr. Graham told his parents that he "couldn't understand why the boys wanted to watch hockey, when they could be doing homework."

Weekend preparation

Fridays in class were memorable. To quote another classmate, "I recall him passing a dish around, constantly collecting coins and sending them to the Holy Ghost Missions abroad." I believe that his collections were because of his previous seventeen years as a Spiritan missionary in Mauritius. He would remind us, 'A dime here, is like \$10 over there'. He did



Father Edward Graham CSSp

1924-2012

Spiritan 1942; Priest 1950;
College du Saint-Esprit, Mauritius
1951-1968; Neil McNeil High
School, Toronto 1969-1985;
Spiritan Provincial Bursar
1989-2003.

not just teach us math; he also reminded us of the value and simplicity of charitable works and personal sacrifice.

My own memory of Fridays was Father Graham referring to our girlfriends as "the lovely Belinda". His advice to us at the end of class would be: "Men, when you take the lovely Belinda out this weekend, remember to leave room for the Holy Spirit." I remember that with a smile. Even to this day, occasionally, when I greet my high school sweetheart and wife of 30 years, I will call her "the lovely Belinda".

Thank you

Several of us met him over the years since high school. Whether it was at Providence Centre, Neil McNeil, or Laval House, I was always impressed when I listened to us expressing how much gratitude we had for him, how happy we were to have had him as our mathematics teacher and to have the chance now to say thank you.

He continually wanted to know if he had been 'too hard' on us!! He was told in response "that because of him, his students were able to excel in life". One classmate reports that he "was able to breeze through first and second year math at university because he prepared us so well". From that class of ours came doctors, engineers, physicists, teachers, lawyers, accountants, actuaries, public relations and civil rights leaders, and many successful businessmen. I know that he, in part, was instrumental in that success.

His only request of us was "that we would pray for him". I am certain that because of his efforts with us, and the respect and honour we gave him in return, that will be done. ■