The history of Neil McNeil is a collage of thousands of stories. Here is just one of them.

The school was just two years old when Fr. Michael Troy employed a young newly-qualified music teacher with no track record in teaching. It was an inspired choice as Russ Stachin was to found and build one of the great high-school music programs in the city.

The first motley crew who signed up for the program played on second-hand instruments which had been stored in the basement of another Catholic High School. The one great advantage about them was that they were free. The music students met for class in an ordinary classroom and the band practiced in the library, gymnasium or teachers’ room if one of these happened to be free. A true music room was badly needed, but the Archdiocese said that it had spent as much money on Neil as it was ever going to spend.

So I drew up a clever plan. I invited Monsignor Kyte, the chairman of the Archdiocese Education Committee to my
Kevin Malcolm (1987)
I remember the day well. The first day of Grade 9 is etched into my memory. I was petrified.

The enormity of the place struck me and the terrifying rumours built around a man who supposedly suspended Grade 9s for slight uniform infractions — Mr. Michael Heron. For years, it seemed that the only time you saw him was when you were cutting a last period class — wearing jeans.

The uniform, a thing you were terribly conscious of in your first year of TTC rides home, became a kind of ‘second skin’ after a while, usually worn in various stages of disarray and with a kind of totemistic sense of pride.

However, for me, it is the camaraderie established over the years that sets Neil apart.

The teachers added character to the school and helped mold its personality. Who could forget Mr. Dooley’s math class? One compulsory credit in his course should be a pre-requisite to a graduation diploma. Who could forget Mr. Guerriero’s French lessons or Mr. Brunnock’s puns?

Did I ever regret my decision to come to Neil? Granted, it hasn’t always been a bed of roses, but overall I think I have the confidence to say, “Never!”

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Serpents
(Matthew 10:16)

The Monsignor and I were comfortably sitting down and just about to start lunch when the bell rang for the start of period four. I could faintly hear Russ giving instructions to the class as I chatted with my guest. Then suddenly the most awful discordant cacophony of sound erupted; I can still hear the horns and the drums.

Monsignor sat up in his chair and said “What, in the name of God, is that?”

“Oh, that’s the niners. Pretty good for beginners, don’t you think,” I replied.

All through our meal the unearthly noise of discord came through the wall as I explained to the Monsignor in shouts that speaking to parents and school board officials in my office could be difficult at times because we had no music room.

Within a month surveyors were in looking at the site at the south end of the property and the music program soon had a home worthy of it.

When Fr. FitzGerald was Principal he introduced a school curriculum and class schedule to encourage students to choose music as one of their subjects. The department grew to three full-time teachers and sixteen music classes a day. There were three school bands playing classical music as well as Pat Riccio’s Jazz Ensemble.

The standard of music was so high that the bands were frequently invited to perform. They played in the Canadian Embassy in Rome to honour a visit there by Prime Minister Trudeau. They played at the Canadian Pavilion in Osaka during Expo. They marched down O’Connell Street in Dublin on St. Patrick’s Day. The students in the Music program were wonderful ambassadors for the school.

And this is but one tale taken from the storybook of the life at Neil McNeil.