Old Men Forget

John Geary
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John Geary CSSp
(Principal 1968 – 1975)

Numbers are important in the Bible. Seven is one of these important numbers. It stands for completeness, fullness. My years at Neil McNeil fall into two groups of seven — the first group referring to my years as a classroom teacher (1961 – 1968) and the second to my time as Principal (1968 – 1975). Completeness doesn’t mean that I did everything in either of those periods and left nothing for anyone else to do; far from it. However, fullness might mean that my students had enough of me in the first seven years and the school enough of me in the second.

Growing reputation

When I became Principal the school had come of age. It no longer had to prove itself among the Catholic High Schools of the Metro Toronto area: its academic, sporting and spiritual credentials were established; parents readily sent their sons to us, boys themselves were eager to come.

★★★★★ ROCCO GUERRIERO

A young boy arrived from Italy and within months was dressed in maroon and grey and sitting in a desk in Fr. Bill McGough’s home room, 9A. Such exotic learning aids as ESL were unheard of in the late sixties. The practice was to dump new arrivals into the deep end and see whether they would sink or swim.

And young Rocco Guerriero from Monte Leone quickly learned to swim. He took to Neil like a duck to water. It became his home away from home in Canada. Rocco became the consummate Neiler. Apart from four years at university, Rocco has been a major part of Neil and Neil a major part of Rocco ever since.

Rocco has officially retired a couple of times and unofficially retired a few other times but if you step into the school building today, nearly fifty years after Rocco did so for the first time, you are likely to meet him in the hall or staff room or administration offices or even in a classroom.

In those forty-nine years Rocco has held many roles from Guidance Head to Soccer Coach since he returned to Neil as a teacher of French in 1968. At that time boys of Italian parentage began arriving in Neil in considerable numbers and Rocco became their Don. He constantly reminded them that as newcomers to Canada they had to study harder than the native-born, to have higher standards of behaviour. He guided them, monitored them, introduced Italian classes for them and coached them. And they responded in kind.

Today many of our illustrious alumni are proud products of their Italian heritage and Neil McNeil High School.
here as a result of the school’s growing reputation and the good reports they were getting from those who had preceded them from their own elementary schools. We were beginning to have an accommodation problem — always a welcome problem inasmuch as it is sign that a school must be doing something right. That was the age of rapid expansion of the Catholic High School system in Toronto: a huge vote of confidence in that peculiar hybrid, a school publicly supported in Grades 9 and 10, then private in Grades 11-13 when boys or their families had to find the tuition money we were obliged to charge.

**Financial sacrifice in Grades 11-13**

I don’t know anyone who regrets the arrival in 1981 of extended funding to the end of Grade 13 as it then was. But equally, there is no denying the unique spirit that attached to a school where tough decisions had to be made each year about remaining in the private sector where it cost real, significant money to be enrolled. The quality of commitment this required was something very special and deeply valued by those of us charged with the responsibility of keeping the school financially viable. To a very limited extent we were able to help a few outstanding boys whose families could not afford tuition. But the morale created in the senior grades among young men who had chosen to continue in a Catholic school which required financial sacrifice was vibrant, healthy and percolated down to the youngest boys.

**Memorable trips**

Unsurprisingly, the things that stand out are the unusual: Band trips, superbly organized by that tireless musician, Russell Stachiw. Giving the lie to the notion of the feckless artist, he proposed, orchestrated (so to speak) and executed with conspicuous success ambitious projects such as the unforgettable trip to Japan in 1970 to play at the World Exposition in Osaka. Scarcely less memorable was the previous one to Montréal to Expo 67. I think with fondness of trips to Stratford for the Shakespearean Festival and to Oka, to the Cistercian monastery, where boys were given a glimpse into a world scarcely imaginable in our daily life. One still occasionally meets people who went on one or several of such trips and who remember them as formative, inspiring.

Above all, what I remember with most pleasure from those years 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. ■