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# “Our Title is Our Glory”

Noel P. Martin

“You are going to Toronto,” the Provincial said. “That’s in Canada,” he added sensing that I might be geographically challenged.

And so it was that on September 13, 1965 I arrived at Neil McNeil High School, and a forty-three year old love affair with a Canadian education institution began. “Neil boys are we, our title is our glory!” Neil imprinted me, Neil informed me, and in a host of different and differing ways Neil McNeil High School shaped the Catholic teacher in me. I have often said, sometimes in jest but more often in earnest, and with apologies to Shakespeare for this butchering of *The Merchant of Venice*, “if you scratch me, will I not bleed maroon and grey!”

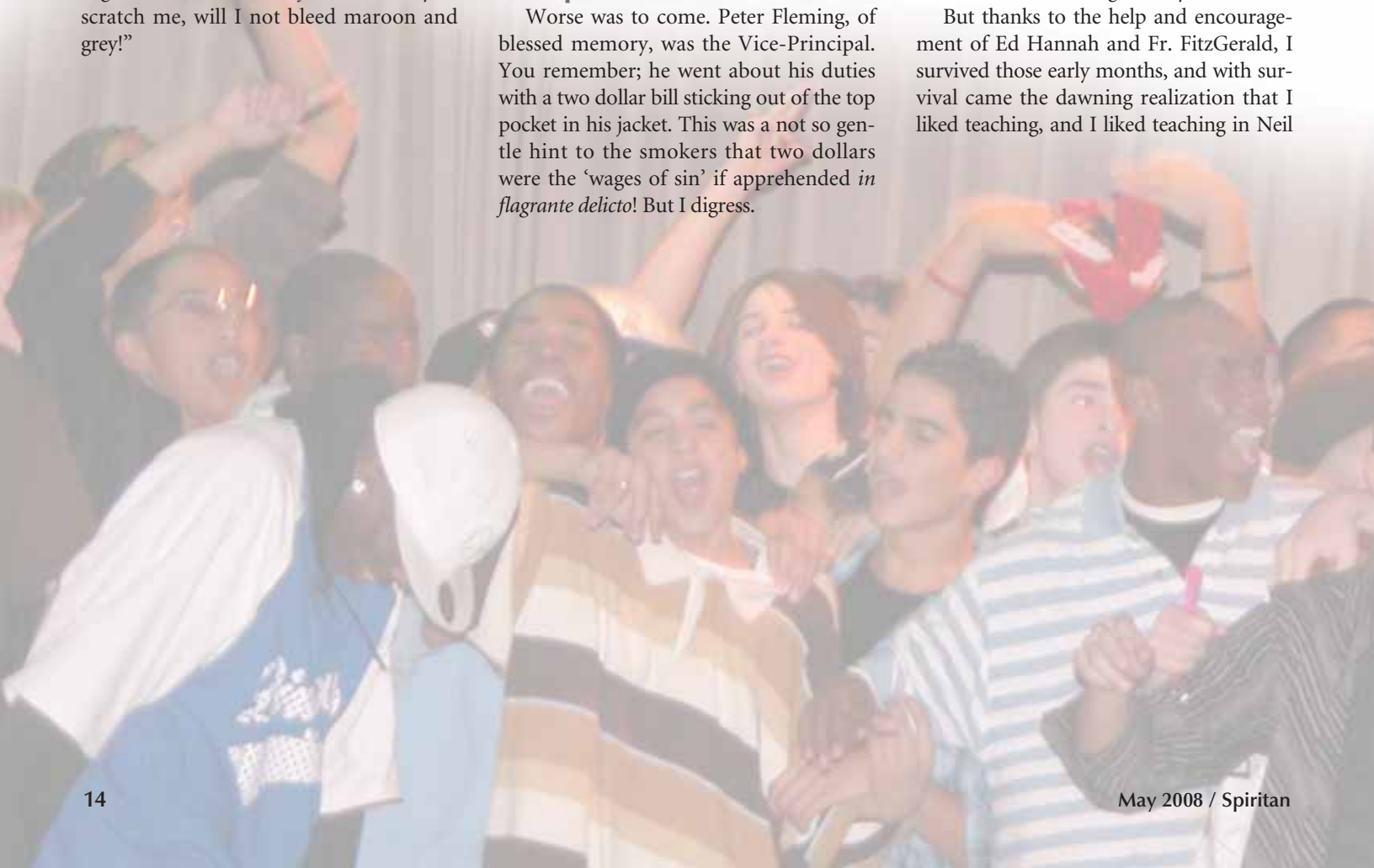
But back to the beginning. After a rousing welcome to the school by an assembly of the whole community on September 14, reality came crashing about my head on September 15. I had a Homeroom — 10C. I had never heard of a Homeroom before. ‘Home’ — yes; ‘room’ — yes, but ‘Homeroom’? We didn’t have ‘Homerooms’ in Ireland. What is a ‘Homeroom’? What do you do in a ‘Homeroom’? And when you find yourself standing clueless in one, will someone please tell me what to do with these thirty plus maroon clad Canadian teens!

## A fun place to teach

Worse was to come. Peter Fleming, of blessed memory, was the Vice-Principal. You remember; he went about his duties with a two dollar bill sticking out of the top pocket in his jacket. This was a not so gentle hint to the smokers that two dollars were the ‘wages of sin’ if apprehended *in flagrante delicto*! But I digress.

My class schedule had two subjects — Latin in Grade 11A and 12B and Science for all Grade 9. In a moment of excessive enthusiasm I had indicated to Pete that my teaching subjects were Latin, Greek, Irish and Botany. Vice-Principal Fleming saw ‘Botany.’ He made the unwarranted assumption that I could teach ‘Science’, and solved his dilemma of not having a Grade 9 Science Teacher. The first half of the course was all Physics. I do not like Physics. Physics and I are not on any kind of speaking terms. My teaching of those Grade 9 Science classes gave new meaning to the concept of being one page ahead of the kids. And that was on good days!

But thanks to the help and encouragement of Ed Hannah and Fr. FitzGerald, I survived those early months, and with survival came the dawning realization that I liked teaching, and I liked teaching in Neil



McNeil High School. Teaching in a Catholic School is a unique vocation. Without sermonizing or proselytizing, you begin to realize that you can bring that distinctiveness of the Catholic school to bear on the lives of young people. The fact that one could have fun doing so was an added bonus. And Neil was a fun place to teach. All one had to do was look at the staff!

### A unique teaching staff

One remembers Gerry Crowe, a great history teacher, standing on a desk in his classroom waving a real sabre in his imagined role of some heroic general leading his troops into some great battle. Or we remember the same Gerry Crowe musing in great perplexity as to how his Volkswagen had managed to park itself between the two great maple trees that bordered the football field. (*Footnote:* I think it is time for those six students from Grade 11 to own up to their mischief!)

### All-boys school

McNeil boys are we! A school without students is just an empty shell. Students are the life blood of a school. Their indefatigable energy and enthusiasm vibrate throughout a school. A school during the long summer vacation rings hollow, and is somehow eerily silent.

### The Christmas Hooley

An all-boys school can be raucous and loud. It has an atmosphere and smells all of

its own. But it is unquestionably alive. The brash and exuberant energy of the Neil boys found a ready outlet in the plethora of extra-curricular activities that filled the school calendar. They stretched from the wide ranging athletics program to that most unique Neil McNeil creation — the Christmas ‘Hooley.’ This Roman circus was the brainchild of the late Gerry Smialek in which the late Paul McKerry was once featured as a Monty Pythonesque Cardinal from the Spanish Inquisition, and the Phys. Ed. Department, suitably attired in tou-tous, performed a *pas de deux* from *The Sleeping Beauty* to the howls of laughter and derision from an audience high on *Gerbil Juice*.

This latter, a Hooley tradition, was the creation of the Science Department Head, the same Gerry Smialek, and was a laboratory concoction of various fruit juices and cordial that was quite popular with the masses, and as far as can be told was innocent of any intoxicants. It might be tempting to surmise that when one member of the cast of *The Sleeping Beauty*, having executed a flying leap, hit the stage floor with a resounding thud because his erstwhile catcher, semi-blind without his glasses, hopelessly failed to see the flying Helmut Stoekle, the cause of the balletic mishap was in some manner related to the *Gerbil Juice* ingredients. The standing ovation that followed was notorious for its insincerity.



### Angels we have heard on high

But it was Christmas, and that was the Christmas of the Apparition of the Neil McNeil Angel. There were those who dismissed the apparition as a hoax or the delusion of unsteady minds besotted with the afore-mentioned *Gerbil Juice*, but there were reliable witnesses who were there for the spectacular event.

Paul Torrance, the Head of English, had indicated to his Grade 13 English class a certain reservation about his belief in the reality of the Angelic Horde. This quasi-heretical musing came to the attention of





the Religion Department, notably to the mind of one Ted Schmidt, who felt it was his bounden Christian duty to counteract such disbelief. Conspiring with Russ Stachiw and willing conspirators from the Grade 13 class, a scenario was played out which saw Ted, robed as an Angel, being lowered by rope from a classroom window on the second floor, to the only window in Paul's classroom that had the drapes partially drawn, while the trumpet section of the Senior Band playing *Angels we have heard on High* in the corridor outside Room 108!

### Ancient Canadian customs

And that same brass section of the Senior Concert Band was part of another story, but in a different setting and in a far away land. In 1970 the band was on one of its many international tours. This time we were in Osaka, Japan, to play at the World's Fair. We were billeted for three days in a rural hostel several miles from Osaka where our Japanese hosts were applying the somewhat rigorous and restrictive rules of the hostel to warm-blooded Canadian youths who were on tour. The omens were not auspicious.

On our second night there, with a call for the 10:00pm 'Lights Out' imminent, Father Tom Garvey conspired with the trumpet section, with the rest of the band members and, I hasten to add, the supervising staff members, that just as the "Lights Out" call sounded the trumpets would play a stirring version of the *The Last Post*, perhaps better known as *Taps*. The "Lights Out" call sounded. Fr. Garvey dropped his

imaginary conductor's baton. And as the clarion notes of *The Last Post* reverberated in the stillness of the quiet night air, and the rest of us froze to a stiff attention, our Japanese hosts came racing upstairs to investigate and quell the cause of this unseemly commotion, only to be met with the awesome phenomenon of the penetrating Garvey glare. He froze the unfortunate newcomers with an icy, "*Silence! Please to show respect for ancient Canadian custom.*"

### A two-way proposition

Neil McNeil is all about community, a vibrant Catholic school community. It is in addition a vibrant Spiritan community, which shares in the same educational philosophy with other Spiritan high schools around the globe. That philosophy looks to the education of the whole person intellectually, spiritually, emotionally, physically and with a significant emphasis on service to humanity at home and abroad.

Yes, there were days for many of us, when any other profession on the face of the earth seemed more attractive than the task of opening young minds to the possibilities that lay ahead. But that was a passing shadow. To teach, one has to love the student in all that student's moods and tenses. The vocation of teaching has long term implications, and teaching in a Catholic school has eternal implications.

It is with great pride that we the teachers at Neil view the significant contributions that the students have made to the fabric of life in Ontario and indeed across Canada

and beyond. Neil McNeil Alumni have graced many careers and professions. That so many have followed us into the teaching profession is both flattering and humbling. Learning is a two-way proposition. Students learn from us, we learn from you. If the learning in a classroom is not mutual, then it is an undeveloped learning.

### Remembering and forgetting

The human memory has the capacity to filter out most of the unpleasantness that life throws our way. We cherish the exciting and fun situations — Father McGough's French verbs; the Student Council Elections; teams winning championships; Hockey Night at Ted Reeve Arena; Nick Nolan's record-setting relay team at the Gardens Indoor Track and Field meet; the Chocolate Bar campaign; Cory Boisselle's incredible two points against Del while lying on his back under the basketball net. We forget the boring classes, the food in the cafeteria, the visits to Mr. Heron's office, the football practices on those cold, wet October evenings, the assignments that went in really late, the day your pants ripped!

It is in the nature of every human community that death should come to all. On this 50th anniversary we remember the students and staff who were taken from us in an untimely fashion. But we do not grieve as those who have no hope. Our Christian hope solidly reminds us that '*for your faithful people life has changed not ended.*' Our dead are still part of us, and we are part of them.

### Grateful hearts

I shall never forget Neil McNeil. It was my introduction to this wonderful country and I would not change it. Many of us, students and staff, are older now, maybe even wiser. Our hair which was long, short or shaven is now grey, thinning or gone. But we celebrate this Anniversary with grateful hearts knowing that we spent time together in this mutual enterprise called Catholic Education, and in that time affected some change in each other. And with an apology and a paraphrase of the W.B. Yeats poem, Easter 1916, we, the alumni and staff of Neil McNeil High School proclaim:

*Now and in time to be,  
Wherever maroon and grey is worn  
McNeil boys are we!  
Our Title is our Glory! ■*