

# Spiritan Magazine

---

Volume 32  
Number 2 May

Article 14

---

5-2008

## A Very Special Place

John Gaither

Follow this and additional works at: <https://dsc.duq.edu/spiritan-tc>

---

### Recommended Citation

Gaither, J. (2008). A Very Special Place. *Spiritan Magazine*, 32 (2). Retrieved from <https://dsc.duq.edu/spiritan-tc/vol32/iss2/14>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Spiritan Collection at Duquesne Scholarship Collection. It has been accepted for inclusion in Spiritan Magazine by an authorized editor of Duquesne Scholarship Collection.



# A Very Special Place

*John Gaither (Principal 1994 – 1999)*



It was in the spring of 1984 that I first entered the doors of Neil McNeil to be interviewed for the new position of second Vice Principal necessitated by increased enrolment.

Now as I think back on that interview with Father Fleming, it was more of a casual chat than a formal set of questions. Father Peter asked about my family and shared with me his memories of when he started at Neil as a very young priest from Ireland. Then I abruptly asked about John Candy's years at Neil because I had read many times that Candy was quoted as saying how much of his success was owed to Neil.

## John Candy Arts Centre

Years later, after I became Principal of Neil, the Spiritans moved to a new residence on the Neil property and the vacated house became part of the school. The staff gave their wholehearted support to my suggestion that the new addition became known as The John Candy Arts Centre, in his memory.

## Please don't step on that

The reason I tell this particular story is that it captures so much of what I believe we often refer to as the Neil "spirit". In a humorous way, I experienced it on my first day as Principal. For instance, as I walked out of Father Peter's former office that day, I remember feeling drawn to the noisy clamour of boys playing basketball. As I approached the gym doors, I heard a grade nine student from behind say, "Sir, please don't step on that." I looked down and saw "that" was "sacred" territory... the school emblem and *Fidelitas in Arduis* motto beautifully embedded in the marble floor.

## Changing enrolment

When I became Principal in 1994, school enrolment was much smaller because of changing demographics. During those five years as Principal, I witnessed a staff determined to make Neil a place where parents would be eager to send their sons. To this day this is still happening as Grade Nine enrolment increases every year. I will take some small credit for this but quite honestly I think it was the hard work of the staff that, along with Vice Principal Gary Donovan, made this turnaround possible.

At that time, the school was looking tired and worn and a campaign was begun to get rid of the Annex and dilapidated portables, paint the cafeteria and gym and go begging to the Board for new lockers.



## John Candy

Your character is formed here. You don't understand it at the time, but as you get older, you realize what a great place this is. My success is rooted in the values of discipline and respect for others that I was taught at Neil.



**Jim Hughes (1963)**  
 I grew up in a Catholic household, headed by a grizzled Irish grandfather who wore his faith on his sleeve, which in Orange Toronto was a gutsy thing to do. My years at Neil helped expand and solidify what had been taught at home and at church: trust in God, watch over the little guy and never give up.



The latter request along with many other improvements was finally dealt with several years later by the current Principal, John Shanahan.

In 1999, I decided to take early retirement and in order not to lose my connection to Neil, I proudly continued to recruit at several elementary schools and I would do so today if it weren't for my involvement as a volunteer with the charity Free the Children.

**How much Neil meant**

Just the other day, I was returning home from the charity office and while standing on the subway platform I heard a man call out my name. I turned around and saw a

familiar face — despite the years. I remembered him because he had been in my office many times because of disciplinary problems. He shook my hand firmly and told me that he had graduated from university and now worked as an investment broker. In the minutes we shared, he told me how much Neil had meant to him and how his years there were his only true experience of community despite his behaviour.

I think that brief encounter exemplifies why Neil in the past fifty years has been so important in so many lives ... alumni, today's students, families, staff and, I am proud to say, mine. Neil is indeed a very special place. ■