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Transforming Young Boys into Catholic Leaders

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Mark Rodas (1996)

Neil McNeil is the best friend a teen can have. One can be totally lost, or totally stupid, and still expect the concern and guidance of this institution. Neil is an educational body — one that builds on each person’s individuality.

It’s blind to discrimination and alienation. It’s a family away from home. Neil gives space to grow. It’s a spring from which confidence and self-awareness flow. It’s quite a cultural experience being here. Everyone is different, yet paradoxically the same.

Neil gives you choices. It enables you to make informed decisions where to take your life and how to get there.

Transforming Young Boys

*John Shanahan
(Principal since 2001)*



*“... the Holy Ghost
over the bent World
broods with warm
breast and with ah!
bright wings.”*

— Gerard Manley Hopkins

The world has changed dramatically in fifty years. Each decade has been like a century. New technologies and new ideas have opened the door to new worlds and new possibilities.

Neil McNeil, too, has changed. Once a private Catholic Boys’ School operated by the Spiritans, it is now a publicly funded Catholic Boy’s school under the jurisdiction of the Toronto Catholic District School Board. The building has seen many

★★★★★ **TED SCHMIDT**

Ted (Mr. Schmidt always seemed too formal for this man) came to Neil with a reputation as a basketball coach — and he soon made his mark as coach of Neil’s senior team. He came with a reputation as a teacher who connected with students. He came with a burning desire to connect religion and life, religion and critical thinking. He “fired up” a great many students and staff, he provoked them to challenge themselves and the society they lived in.

For him the kingdom way of life that Jesus preached was not just the kingdom of heaven. It gave us a vision of how life should be lived on earth. It called for the church not to be fixated on itself, but to get its hands dirty in the messy situations of today.

Ted was a real character for both staff and students. He was outrageous, always confrontational, challenging, questioning, debunking and scoffing. And he did his ministry from a deep understanding of the teachings and example of Christ, and with an original sense of humour.

Those who were comfortable with the way things were felt undermined by Ted, but those whom he reached were set on fire. How many teachers still keep in touch with former students thirty years later? Ted meets with groups of alumni throughout the year for esoteric discussions and the celebration of such anniversaries as Saul Mazurman’s birthday.

Whatever Ted believed in his heart he proclaimed in his teaching and his actions. It was said of his recent book *Journeys to the Heart of Catholicism*: “His essays prod and disturb, sometimes ruffle feathers and confront, but always bring insight.” The same could be said of Ted’s high school teaching at Neil. In Room 310 Jesus came alive for many students and the gap between faith and life was bridged.



Keith Martin (1979)

I went through the science stream, but regardless of what classes you took, the teachers had an uncanny ability to challenge your faith and your character. In religious studies we were continually challenged to bring our faith into the real world. From the Solidarity world of Poland to the battles for justice and peace, our faith was brought to life in our Spartan classrooms.



into Catholic Leaders

changes and renovations. The community is excited by the possibility of a new modern facility which would permit us to expand and enhance our programs.

New technologies have changed teaching and learning in all subject areas. Students write their compositions on Word Processors, conduct their research on the Internet, deliver their presentations on PowerPoint and use assistive software to master difficult concepts and support their learning. New technologies have redesigned traditional programs and ushered in new courses in a variety of subject areas.

The faculty is comprised almost entirely of lay staff, many of whom are recent additions to the community. Even the uniform has undergone subtle changes in order to make it current. Certainly, Neil McNeil has embraced change and continues to flourish in the new millennium.

Key ingredients

Paradoxically, however, what distinguishes our school, what defines it and makes it unique, is the unwavering commitment of its community to the unchanging values with which the founding Spiritan Fathers imbued it: service to others, compassion, faith, inclusiveness, resilience, Christian leadership, academic excellence, and humility as defined in the Spiritan philosophy and exemplified in the Gifts of the Holy Spirit. These values are still the key ingredients in its mission of transforming young boys into Catholic leaders.

Today, the Neil McNeil community continues to celebrate its Catholic traditions. Liturgical celebrations, the sacrament of Reconciliation, and spiritual retreats, are central to the life of the community. Staff and Spiritans encourage students to recognize Christ in themselves and others. The

Father Troy Award of Excellence challenges students to strive to be their best in all aspects of their lives. Through such programs as the Father McCarthy Leadership Program, the student-led Young Spiritans Fundraising program for schools and students in developing countries, various Student Council initiatives and student participation in Habitat for Humanity, the community provides students with opportunities and experiences which enable them to discover their leadership talents and use them in the service of others.

The Greek philosopher, Heraclitus said, "Change is the only constant." Undoubtedly, Neil McNeil will face still more change. The challenge will be to preserve its core values, while embracing this change. We move forward confident that the Holy Spirit will guide and enlighten us on the journey. ■