

God, Life and Everything
The 50 Year Bumblebee

This month, the Bumblebee turns 50.

Okay, if you must know that means that fifty years ago, St. James' Nursery School opened its doors for the first time. Back then, it was supposed to be a partner school to a larger Episcopal elementary school operated by another church.

That school was to be called St. George's, but it only lasted a year or so. Soon, all that was left was St. James'.

The school was created in large part through the leadership of Fr. Gordon Kidd who was the rector of the church at the time (and for all you Hyde Park aficionados, the father of Gloria Golden and father-in-law of John Golden). Its first head teacher (as near as I can tell - certain one of the first) was Isabella Connolly who led the school for many years.

To this day, there is a reminder of the Connolly influence on the school. Near the beginning of its history, Isabella's husband Bob built a play loft - maybe five feet off the ground and roughly 12 X 12 in area. The loft still exists, and thanks to safety-minded design has never had an accident in all these years.

One of the delights I experience as the so-called headmaster of the school (a title with almost no meaning, but it sounds cool), is that former students, even grown-ups, will come to visit. The first thing they look for is that loft.

A few years ago, I was planning a funeral for a man who was just about my age. His son, a man himself in his mid-twenties, was in my office planning the funeral. His best friend was with him to offer support. When we finished, I asked if there was anything I could do for him. They looked at each other, and then he said, "We both went to the nursery school when we were little. Could we have a look at it?" I took them to the school (it was after hours), and the moment I opened the door, it was as if they had been transported. They walked in, look around and in unison cried, "The loft!" I felt so pleased that it could be not only a fun thing for children but a healing tool for grieving adults.

My other favorite activity as headmaster is going in each week to read bible stories to the kids. I'm like the favorite uncle. I go in, read a story, sing a rousing song with them, get them all hyped up - and leave. Our brave, kind, loving teachers Kim Illuminate and Kathleen Craft have learned how to channel that released energy, but it can't be easy.

There's really nothing easy about being a parochial nursery school. It has a unique mission, serving as a Christian setting with Christian values (we pray before snack time, we read bible stories, we even raise money to help sick children) - but we do so always with the fundamental mission of teaching the kids socialization skills. It's our philosophy that kids who learn how to play and work together, and take direction from the teacher are better prepared for the stresses and strains of education. That's why we don't worry too much about teaching reading, writing and arithmetic - at this age, these aren't as important as socialization.

Over the years, St. James' Nursery School has helped prepare hundreds if not thousands of kids for elementary school. We have always done this and, God willing, always will. For the last sixteen years, I've gotten to watch the kids attend, grow and leave. Sometimes they come back. Sometimes I run into them in the store or at one of the other schools. The funny thing is, kids change very quickly. Once I was walking down the hall of Haviland Middle School after doing a presentation of some sort or other when suddenly a voice cried, "Father Chuck!" Next

thing I knew, a kid I would swear I had never met before grabbed me in a bear hug. Talk about awkward. As it turns out, I did know who they were ... but like I say, kids change real fast.

My own sons went through the school, so it has meaning for me as a parent. That's why I'm glad the kids are in such good hands. Our teachers have always offered loving care seasoned with just enough humor and flexibility.

Which brings me to why our school's "mascot" is a bumblebee. Years ago - nobody is quite sure how many - one of the kids drew what they claimed was a bumblebee and said it was for the school. The teachers went with it - and turned it into t-shirts, signs and letterhead. Over the years, that bumblebee has been refined, but it is still our symbol. Heck, in the town parades, the Nursery School board has even taken to dressing my tiny yellow car up as a bumblebee. Look for it at the next parade.

And while you're looking, look into the school. If you have small children, consider it as a loving Christian option. If you attended the school - whether it was five or fifty years ago - stop by and reminisce. The loft is still there waiting for you. *(But if it's during school hours, please ask for me - the teachers are busy teaching! Better yet, call ahead).*