

Gary Milanowski – graduate 1980

During my pursuit of “higher education”, I often found myself saying – “none of these, teachers, classes or subjects are preparing me for real life challenges.” Thank God for St. Stephen School, because I learned more valuable life lessons between first and eighth grade than any other schooling.

It's not just that these are the years that you learn to read, write and do arithmetic for the first time. It's also about who taught me, who I learned with and to what end this education is supposed to serve in the grand scheme of things.

I fondly remember listening to Sr. Marquerite read the Adventures of Pippi Longstocking and opening up our world to the wild adventures of the girl in pigtails who lived with a horse. Sister was one of four Dominicans I had here. These women were great teachers...selfless, compassionate and wise in ways beyond the subjects they taught. Everybody these days seem to conjure up stories of wicked nuns rapping them with rulers. I knew only kindness, patience, and creativity from them. Granted Sr. Camilla was a little strict, but what fourth grade boy doesn't need a little discipline.

St. Stephen School was diverse or multi-cultural long before people knew what to call it. We were a mix of kids from East Grand Rapids, kids from the Ottawa Hills' neighborhood and students from various neighborhoods on the Southeast side of town. We were accepting of each other and realized at some point that your classmates and friends are just who they are. We didn't care who was black or white or who came from the East side or the inner city. What mattered to us was – what game are we going to play at recess, or do you want trade lunches, or play after school, or ride to football practice together. Do you want to hold hands with me at the roller skating party? That's what really mattered.

There was also the great element of being in a Parish school. We knew each other's families. We worshiped at Mass together, volunteered at sporting events and watched out for each other. We were raised by each other's parents. We were fortunate to have kindly Msgr. Alt celebrate Mass with our class once a week. There was a real Catholic spirit infused into every part of our schooling. We prayed, played, grew and found our way into the larger world with an innate sense of understanding of the value of all God's people.

St. Stephen's was a unique place to grow up in and I couldn't have wished anything better. To this day, I count as my best friends the guys I met in first grade. I carry many good lessons and values about my world that I believe were rightly taught to me at St. Stephen School.