

THE FIRST TEN YEARS

SETTLING IN, EXPANDING OUT

To say that Collingwood School was actually ready to open in September 1984 would be a major overstatement. There were barely any supplies with which to start classes. The textbooks were few and old. Blackboards and desks were on order and yet to arrive. The children's uniforms had not been delivered. Volunteers Val Vopni and Keith Thibodeau had spent countless hours devising the curriculum at the eleventh hour, barely ready for the arrival of the children. Skeptical parents gathered in the gymnasium, whispering about the hastily composed and rather spartan setting. The children treated it as an adventure, tentatively wondering what their parents had signed them up for. Headmaster David Mackenzie took the stage and delivered a confident welcoming speech, cautioning all that conditions would be basic, if not primitive. But he never flagged on the message that Collingwood School had set sail with the clear intent and purpose of becoming a distinguished independent school. His confident, soothing tone was therapeutic, reminding the crowd of their commitment to the ideal of the School and inspiring a joyous sense of adventure in what lay ahead.

The Board's sage edict against going into debt despite no initial government funding would guarantee parsimony for the first three years. But they did support ambitious fundraising plans that would eventually equip the School properly. They simply asked for time and trust. In addition to plans for an impressive inventory of science labs, musical instruments and sports equipment there would be a major budget challenge each year with the addition of one new class until the School offered Grades K through 12.

But back to those first days. Sharing Mackenzie's vision and purpose was the new faculty, attracted to Collingwood because of the enhanced opportunity to personally design curricula and define teaching methodology, and the reward of sharing that opportunity with like-minded colleagues. Some were not prepared for the threadbare challenge that they encountered, but many of them – notably Lore Acton, Diana Bedford, Kathleen Culham, Sandra Dawson, Rose Dudley, Roger Hatch, Kathy Turner and others – would power through and become venerable pillars of the institution.

As the months passed, operations

began to flow more smoothly, but there were issues behind the scenes. Despite desiring to partner with their peers, the diverse background of the teachers did not always promise unity. Some were beginners, others veterans, and all had a unique perception of what the School should be. There was also a vocal minority of parents who insisted on advising teachers on how to run their classes. Born of economic and strategic necessity, parents had been asked to help out in a myriad of ways, many of them in the classroom. Because they were so intimately involved in the daily operation of the School, some felt it was their duty and right to provide the faculty with their advice. It is important to note that many of these parents were not only engaged professionally in significant enterprises but also quite frequently principal organizers in major Vancouver charities, public endowments and artistic organizations. They poured their hearts into the School as they did their other enterprises. Collingwood School was such a new entity that all groups were challenged to discover and define their boundaries for a successful working relationship for the years ahead. Through all of this, David Mackenzie remained the grounding voice for the entire community. His message remained consistent and credible, but his gentle patient style sometimes frustrated the action-oriented group that he served. He preferred to let things run their course, whereas the Board wanted to make things happen - now. To help Mackenzie with the day-to-day fast paced management of the School, Larry Gallagher joined as Assistant Headmaster and was with the School for 18 months. Gallagher stepped right in, stepped right up and



Headmaster David Mackenzie and the first faculty of Collingwood School.

was very successful in his role as assistant headmaster, aiding Mackenzie wherever aid was required. When he accepted another position in 1986, the Board started thinking long term, and began considering candidates for the position of assistant headmaster who had all the credentials and characteristics to be headmaster of the future.

Mackenzie welcomed the prospect of a protégé, and identified a bright, innovative member of the Brentwood College faculty, Graham Baldwin. When contacted, Baldwin was lukewarm to the idea, but did agree to meet with Collingwood representatives. The chat went well but Baldwin was happy at Brentwood so entertaining this was not a serious possibility. Board member Professor Graham Kelsey had other ideas. He cleverly engineered another meeting for himself, other Board members and Baldwin at the UBC Faculty Club, where a formal offer was made to become assistant headmaster. After much thought Baldwin had decided to decline the offer but somehow during the course of the conversation with Mackenzie, whom he thought must lead a charmed life, he wound up accepting instead!

Baldwin approached his job with considerable enthusiasm and vigour, defining his undefined job description as anything he needed to do as an adjunct to the Headmaster. The Board was pleased with the Mackenzie-Baldwin synergy, which allowed them to focus on the looming financial challenge of a multi-million dollar expansion. When Mackenzie retired in 1987, the Board knew they had put the right man in place to succeed him.

Baldwin teamed up with David Craig, David Petitpierre and Professor Graham Kelsey to author the “Ex Visu Ad Verum – Eventually”, which outlined performance guidelines envisioned for the School. Education and personal development would dictate all future decisions

about personnel and facilities, including directives on evaluating and improving faculty and attracting new teachers with impressive credentials. There were many items in the report that would mature over time, such as the School’s reputation



French teacher Pat Stacey establishes a rapport and good working relationship with her students during those first years: Collingwood was off to a good start!

building as a result of the success of its graduates. But Baldwin saw certain basics that needed shoring up immediately. Replacing a universally popular icon did not make his job easier, but he fervently believed the quality of the teaching was essential so he put into place criteria for evaluating faculty performance and abided by those rules, which did not make him popular at the time. However the benefits of performance accountability soon became evident to the faculty, in the students’ performance and in the response from the parent population.

Enrollment had almost tripled, and with a new senior class being added each year the facilities were quickly becoming inadequate. The School was in excellent financial shape and would soon, after passing the three year mark, be receiving its per-capita entitlement from the provincial government. Despite that new cash influx, any capital development would require mortgage financing, rather than increasing tuition to cover any of those costs. At Baldwin’s suggestion the Board entertained the idea of splitting the School into junior and senior campuses. A potential site was found on Westhill Drive, with a spectacular view of English Bay and downtown Vancouver, a setting unrivalled in the world of independent schools. The project went through various stages, in favour with politicians then in office, out of favour with local residents, somewhat in favour with new politicians in power and finally died after months of frustration and procrastination. The School could not afford to wait for another dream site, so they focused on expanding the Morven Drive campus.

Plans for a \$5.8 million dollar modern wing were announced in early 1988, provoking yet another neighbourhood reaction. Despite the historic fact that a school had existed on

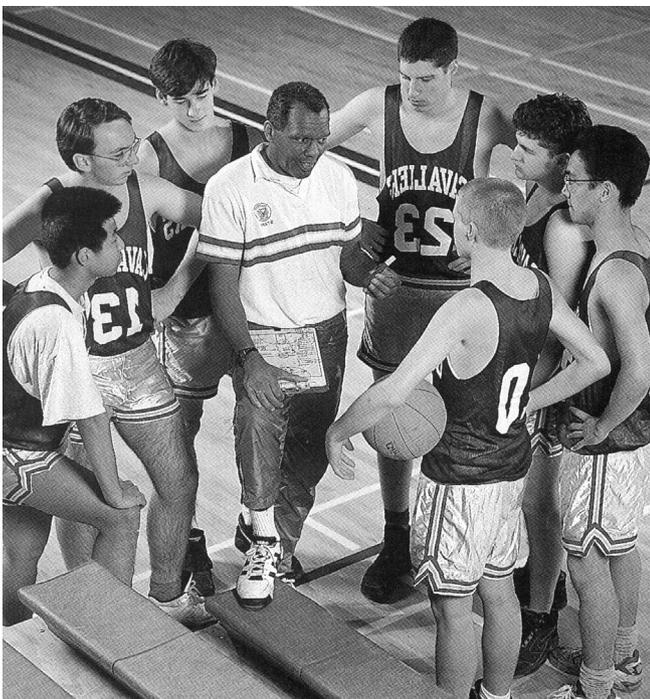


Bert the dog, a familiar sight at the School.

Morven Drive for many years, protesters suddenly found all sorts of objections to a larger school in their neighbourhood. They forecast a gloomy future of traffic jams, noise and falling property values. The politicians did uphold the School's right to expand, but tenacious protesters managed to draw out the process through litigation and many long and stressful council meetings before the final go ahead was given.

After successfully negotiating the purchase of the land on Morven Drive the challenge became securing the funds for the expansion. Financial institutions were happy to loan funds for a completed facility, but the Board needed cash to fund construction in the interim. Peter Clayden devised a clever scheme which would become a prototype many schools would follow to raise capital funds for expansion. At a meeting attended by 596 parents, Clayden suggested that each family unit should sign a guarantee for a proportionate piece of the interim financing. An attractive RRSP option was offered to those who wished to receive dividends on their investment. The vote was 580 in favour, 16 against, and in fact, yielded more money than they actually needed, allowing them to return \$3000 to each family that had signed on.

The Parents' Wing, as it is called, was designed to house the Senior School. Practical needs were married with academic and educational ambitions. Critical to the design was the concept of "domains"; classroom groupings with teachers' offices off a central foyer, creating an intimate feeling of smaller schools within the larger one. A new gymnasium was planned, with an expensive sprung floor and modern equipment.



Jim Burnett, then Director of Physical Education, was thrilled to coach his teams in the new gymnasium.

The new gym was unveiled with great ceremony. Students filed into the space in complete darkness. The switch was flipped and a gasp of delight went up from the crowd as they gazed at the new facility. This new gym was cavernous compared to the previous one which Jim Burnett, Physical Education director, had described as being "the size of a kitchen." After Baldwin's opening remarks, the ceremonial first dunk was to be executed by Burnett. He took his best shot and missed! The crowd hooted and cheered him on, and he nailed the second try perfectly.

The official opening of the Parents' Wing on April 2, 1990 marked the beginning of a new era for Collingwood. Guests flooded the building, including many local dignitaries and founding parents. Acknowledging the staggering contributions of trust and support from the parent body, Baldwin decided to put all their names in a hat and draw one to officially open the building. Lorne and Judy Wilson proudly unveiled the plaque titling the new addition as The Parents' Wing. Another plaque was unveiled by founding Headmaster, David Mackenzie, commemorating the refreshed older facilities as The Founders' Wing. Parent Joe Houssian was delighted to be honoured for his massive contribution to this development project. The businessman, surprised and emotional, addressed the students with a few, but very eloquent words: "We did it for you – enjoy it."

The Parents' Wing physically symbolized what the Collingwood families had been creating for years and gave their children the appropriate surroundings in which to pursue their educational dreams.

Collingwood School graduated its first class in 1989. These graduates were pioneers, working to build a school with humble beginnings, emerging as scholars among their peers in the Province. Their performance, and the performance of each successive graduating class thereafter, proved that the high quality of teaching and the inter-personal relationship between teacher and student are the measures of a successful school. Sophisticated facilities enhance the process, but the highest ambition was and always will be the quality of that relationship.

Pioneering parents and their families had weathered the first ten years with humility, perspective and a unanimous tenacity remaining true to their founding ideals. Faculty had weathered the growth and evolution of the content of their curriculum, methodology and their physical environment. Those founding ideals were consistently referred to and were revered. All the weathering had not left them rough and ragged, instead it revealed a lovely patina of experience and a continued commitment to the next decade, and beyond.