

Good afternoon and welcome to what will likely become one of the most historic school years on record. Our rector usually opens our Parent Orientation with a prayer, but because we are keeping our numbers in attendance low and he is not here, I want to begin by asking the good Lord to hold all of us in the palm of his hands as we embark on the 20-21 school year.

I am Mary Knott and am honored to be starting my seventh year as the director of Redeemer Parish Day School. I have spent the past 19 years at Redeemer as either a parent, teacher or the director. It is a blessing and a privilege, and a whole lot of fun, to work alongside my colleagues as early childhood educators. We love that we spend our day with young learners whose authenticity and enthusiasm are constant signs of hope.

Last spring, which feels like eons ago, we abruptly left school in the middle of March, leaving our school exactly as it was – a lost mitten in the hallway, artwork on the drying racks, a couple of goldfish crackers lost in the corner of a classroom and reminders to “Bee Resilient” – just like the honeybees we had recently studied.

Little did I know then that it would be almost two months before I was allowed back in school and to my office. On my return, Redeemer, a familiar place of great comfort felt stale, empty and frozen in time. It was almost a surreal experience, but the first thing I saw on the top of my desk was a story I will never forget. I have no recollection of ever reading it, where it came from, who might have given it to me or why it was there; but the irony of its message is certainly not lost on me. I would like to take a minute to read it to you.

*“Some people see a closed door and turn away.
Others see a closed door, try the knob
If it doesn't open...they turn away.
Still others see a closed door, try the knob,
If it doesn't open, they find a key,
If the key doesn't fit...
They turn away.
A rare few see a closed door,
Try the knob, if it doesn't open, they find a key,
If the key doesn't fit...
They make one.” (author unknown)*

Our young students are natural born key makers, and it is our job as their parents and educators to do all we can to foster that. They think, play, and learn without preset boundaries, ideas, and beliefs; and it is our job to give them the space and ability to let that grow. We need to give them the opportunity to explore, learn, and think for themselves, along with the freedom to develop independence and learn from failure. As adults who care about them deeply, it can be hard to see them struggle and face

hardship, but as we all know, those are the experiences that help them grow the most. Self-sufficiency, challenge, and failure will give them the confidence to become seasoned key makers.

Back in April, while our state was in the middle of the shutdown, one of our 3-year-old students had finished a counting assignment from his teacher which involved a "bug hunt" outdoors. Afterwards, his mom filmed him recounting the experience to share with his teachers and me. As he was relaying the details, he abruptly stopped, scrunched up his little face, and said, "Mommy we forgot to look for the Coronas. Oh no. We forgot to find the Coronas." At that point, Coronavirus loomed over all of us in a way that often felt insurmountable, but his perception was novel and something to think about. Hopefully one day, COVID will no longer be the virus that stopped the world in its tracks but just another "bug" like the rest of them. That's both encouraging and hopeful.

This is exactly why the perspective of preschoolers should never be taken lightly. Our young learners just think differently, and that is what we need to preserve. 90% of their brain development happens during their preschool years. It is a time of explosive growth, and that makes our job so important. I am incredibly proud and impressed by the Redeemer faculty and their ability to be flexible, innovative, and dedicated to their profession now more than ever.

Whether we like it or not, we will go down in history as the group that taught the children at Redeemer in the midst of COVID. I imagine one day, far in the future, someone will find a picture of us on our playground in lab coats, masks and face shields, surrounded by children in rain suits, covered in mud with eyes that smile. Our students make our work and efforts so worthwhile. COVID might change a lot, but it will never change that.

All of us gathered today are here by choice and full of courage. We are marking a time in history and embarking on a journey and school year like no one before us.

Together, let's be key makers!