



Church ^{of the} Redeemer

PARISH DAY SCHOOL

Good afternoon and welcome to another school year that will undoubtedly be in the history books! I am Mary Knott, and it is an honor to begin my eighth year as the director of Redeemer Parish Day School. It is nice to see our veteran parents as well as all the new families we are welcoming to our community. I have spent the past 20 years at Redeemer as either a parent, teacher, or the director. Spending each day with young learners whose authenticity and enthusiasm are constant signs of hope is a blessing, privilege, and a whole lot of fun.

Back in the fall of 2001 I had just picked my oldest son Aden up from the 2s at Redeemer. As I was preparing lunch, I turned on Mr. Rodger's Neighborhood to keep my little guys entertained. As the opening jingle played, my son Aden walked right up to the TV, clenched his little fists and got right in Mr. Rodger's face and very sternly exclaimed, "No, Rodgers! Not a good day!"

I vividly remembering being struck by the fact that my two-year old was not having a good day, and for the first time I had no idea why. There were lots of things that I could do. I could ask probing questions, call the teachers at school, have him draw a picture to describe his feelings. As an educator and mom, lots of ideas popped into my head. But I decided to do nothing. My mother-in-law wisely taught me as a young mother – and I quote her, "A little neglect goes a long way."

When she offered that advice, it felt contradictory to everything I believed I should be doing as a mother, but I admire her and made a conscious decision to try and follow it. This was a perfect opportunity to give my son the independence to sort out his own feelings. While difficult, I decided that if I really wanted him to become self-sufficient, resilient, and confident, there are times when I would have to give him freedom to work through challenge and hardship all on his own. I needed to embrace the idea that not only did I not need to know everything, but he would also be better off if I didn't. That was just the beginning. My mom likes to remind me, "Little kids, little problems. Big kids, big problems!"

My husband and I joke that Aden is the poster child for learning things the hard way. Now it would be naïve and simply untrue to claim that we have not helped him through challenging times, but I can share that most of the time, he has handled them on his own. In fact, I am quite certain there are many times, especially as he navigated his high school and college years, that I should be grateful for being left in the dark. He has learned and grown the most through his mistakes, failures, and disappointments because he knew it was up to him to overcome and fix them. This past spring, Aden graduated from college. A few weeks ago, he accepted a job in the Leadership School at Camp Kieve. Three days later he packed up his car and moved to Maine. When I asked him what he needed from me, he replied, "Nothing, Mom. I'm good." And he's right, and I can confidently say that when he's not, he will figure it out.

Dr. Stephanie O'Leary, a clinical psychologist specializing in neuropsychology and the author of *Parenting in the Real World*, writes that parents need to "Remember that one of the hardest but most important parts of parenting is to tolerate your child's temporary discomfort knowing that it's the only way to build the coping skills necessary to succeed in the real world." She is exactly right. I could not be prouder of my son, the ways in which he navigates challenge, and the young man he has become. And I still have no idea why his day at school was so bad, he took it out on Mr. Rodgers!

Our children have a lot to teach us. The National Association of Independent Schools recently published an article predicting future trends in schools, rooted in ways our current climate will permanently change education. Among others, they predict an emphasis placed on the value of

human connection and interaction through the creation of more diverse, equitable, and inclusive environments, creative problem-solving through experiential, process-based inquiry and on using the outdoors to incorporate the natural world into learning. Isn't that what generation after generation of young learners have been us teaching all along? Our youngest students already accept the uniqueness of individuals and the importance of being together. They already know that they learn best when they can experiment, explore, question, and collaborate. Ask any child what their favorite part of the school day is, 99.9% will say recess. Plain and simple, that is because they are outside and having fun with friends. Our Redeemer students don't need the educational experts to tell us all that. They already knew.

This is exactly why the perspective of young learners should never be taken lightly. No other population collectively feels quite as comfortable in their own skin as our youngest children. They will sing at the top of their lungs, even if they are off-key and the words are all wrong. If given the choice, they will wear tutus or pajama bottoms on any occasion and don rain boots on the sunniest of days because you never know when you might run into a great puddle. They wear their ever-changing emotions on their sleeves because they want to be sure that all the world knows exactly how they are feeling. While they like to please, they are not trying to impress. They are very happy being themselves. Our young learners demonstrate great wisdom in how they think, and that is what we need to preserve. Ninety percent of their brain development happens during their time with us. 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. Not only have they been busy preparing for the arrival of our students, but they also took advantage of all we learned this past year and spent time over the summer working in teams weaving those lessons into new curricula. As the 3s team wisely said, "We want to be fluid and flexible; we want our students to drive our teaching." Student-centered, experiential teaching and learning is at the foundation of all we do as early childhood educators. We believe it is not just how children learn best, but it is how all people learn best. Collectively our faculty of 20 has 250 years of experience and an average of 12 years in the classroom. They are an excellent team, and we are fortunate they choose to teach at Redeemer.

I recently read an interview of Michael Lewis in Time Magazine. Lewis, author of *The Big Short*, and *Money Ball* - one of my all-time favorites - recently published a book called, *The Premonition: A Pandemic Story*. The characters in the story were developed based on what Lewis believes are lessons learned during the pandemic. To summarize Lewis, two of the main lessons of the pandemic involve regular people doing extraordinary things and the role that unification plays in success. In his words, "Fighting the pandemic is like fighting a war. If the Russians invade, we wouldn't tell Montana and Alabama to field their armies and see if they can coordinate."

You don't have to look far to see the lessons Lewis describes at play. Our Redeemer community exemplifies those lessons, and the story we told last year as we navigated, often blindly, in-person learning amid the pandemic. What the Redeemer teachers accomplished last year was nothing less than extraordinary, and our united response as a community was the reason for our success. As we head into a new year, I for one am tired of COVID-19, quarantines, the term "social distancing", masking, restrictions, and the constant stream of news related to case counts, positivity rates, outbreaks, and the devastating loss of life. I know I am not alone. What I am not tired of are the many silver linings and lessons we have learned that have taught us that when you have a determined and united community who is thoughtful of one another, like Redeemer, you can accomplish great things against all odds.

As a lifelong educator, I am a firm believer in the power of story. Many of life's greatest lessons can be found in children's stories. Heading into a third academic year impacted by COVID, the story of the Itsy-Bitsy spider comes to mind. That little spider climbs all the way up that water spot, down

comes the rain and washes the spider out. Out comes the sun, dries up all the rain, and the itsy-bitsy spider does it all over again. And at the end of that simple but great story, we all believe the sun is shining and the itsy-bitsy spider is on top again.

As we begin the 21.22 program year, we can be proud of all we have accomplished together and look forward to all that lies ahead. With 148 students, 98 families, a new first grade, and the Brood X cicadas who promise to remain underground for 17 years, let's be like that itsy-bitsy spider. Let's tell a great story!

