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Good evening and welcome to the 2023-2024 program year! For those I have not met, my name is Mary Knott, and I have the pleasure and honor of being the Head of Redeemer Parish Day School. My journey here began in 2001 as a parent, volunteer and eventually advisory board member. I then became a PE, science and kindergarten teacher before assuming my responsibilities in administration in 2014. Redeemer is not just my place of employment; it is a wonderful community that feels like family.

All of us are here this evening because we feel strongly about the importance of early childhood education and the positive and productive development of our youngest students. Ninety percent of their brain development happens in their time with us. It is a time of explosive growth. We recognize the importance of our work, understanding that we need to teach our students the way they learn best. Our program is engaging, hands-on, and student-centered, balancing cognitive, social, emotional, and physical learning.

With the addition of our first third grade class, we feel privileged to be Baltimore's only full early childhood program. Our model is backed by research, and we are proud to experience firsthand the love our students of all ages have for learning and coming to school. We are thrilled about plans underway to build a new wing to house our elementary division, and as we begin the fund raising stage, we hope to break ground a year from this November. With our growing program, we have expanded our logo and identity to include the Redeemer Racers and deepened our partnership with Govans Elementary through the First Grade "Hi Neighbor" initiative. This is an exciting time in Redeemer's history, and we are thrilled about the year ahead when we will educate 154 students, ages 2 through 10, through an educational program that is rooted in the Episcopal church and a history that spans more than 70 years. Early learning sets the foundation for all that lies ahead.

Last week my husband and I officially became empty nesters. After nearly 25 years of raising our children, it was hard to believe we were taking our youngest son Cole to college. For me, college drop-offs are among the most jarring of experiences, bittersweet to say the least. This time was especially so. It seemed like we blinked, and our three children grew from little boys to men, embarking on new and separate lives away from home.

I recently read an article in the Atlantic proposing that birth order's impact on personality is nothing but a myth. Our youngest Cole, while shy at times, is quick-witted with a dry, somewhat sarcastic sense of humor. He only speaks when he has something worthwhile to say; a high school coach once described him as the guy who "talks least but says most." Cole is loyal beyond measure, understated, and one of the funniest people I know. He is not an extrovert or outgoing, but he has more friends than I can count. His brothers often refer to him as, "Beast." He has lived a life in hand-me-downs and doesn't have a spoiled bone in his body. While he is the youngest, he doesn't necessarily fit the mold of the stereotypical youngest child.

For this reason, I tend to agree with the Atlantic article. In our case, though, I do believe birth order influenced parenting skills. Cole, who is separated by four years from our middle son, likely spent his childhood a little over exposed and under supervised. But he learned to do so much on his own.

As a toddler, Cole could often be found climbing onto countertops and shelves in the search of



snacks, toys, and anything he deemed important at the time. In middle school I found him in the laundry room loading his clothes into the dryer. I was a little perplexed and asked him if he knew how to do laundry. He quickly replied, “Uh – yeah – someone has to do it!”

In the 7<sup>th</sup> grade, Cole started in a new school. Not being a typical transition year, he was one of only a few new students, and on top of that, he essentially knew no one. Despite this, he was insistent on navigating this unfamiliar territory on his own, and it took only a few weeks before it seemed like he had been there forever. Before Cole started high school, I inquired about his fall uniform requirements and when he was to start school. He looked at me, shook his head and I quote, “Aren't YOU supposed to know that. Can you please parent me, Mom?”

The summer of 2020 when Cole was about to begin his sophomore year, he was in a horrible accident on his grandfather's farm. A Gator, which for those who may not know is a type of tractor, rolled over him while he was working alone. He has no recollection of the incident, and to this day, we still don't know how he made the long walk back to the house to call for help. Cole survived what the ER doctors would later describe as a near life-altering accident. They explained that his injuries were similar to those seen in horrific motorcycle or automobile accidents. When I met up with him in the ER, he was covered in blood and my jaw dropped. He took one look at me and said, “Why do you have to look so nervous?” Cole doesn't like attention or drama. This was my cue to how I better respond. Over the course of his recovery, we met quite a few folks who had no idea that a Gator is a type of tractor. Cole loved nothing more than allowing those wide-eyed people who thought he survived a wrestling match with an alligator to believe just that. He was truly fortunate to walk away with some broken bones and over 50 stitches, nothing that could not be healed over the course of time. Through this traumatic experience, though, it was his independence, resiliency, and sense of humor that got him through.

Cole is not known for keeping his room neat or organized. This summer we set aside a day to go through his things and begin the necessary steps to prepare for college. It was clear in the first five 3 minutes that he wanted to do it alone. I agreed. He procrastinated. But when the time came, he was ready, and he did it on his own.

After an 11-hour trek to the University of Georgia (Go DAWGS!) and celebratory dinner, we moved him into his dorm room in under two hours and it was clear to all of us it was time for us to go. We left our baby in a school with a student enrollment of over 40,000, all but two who were perfect strangers. That takes confidence, courage, strength, and a whole lot of independence – all of which he has. While we know there will be ups and downs, challenges and triumphs, when we dropped him off, we felt confident that he would get by just fine without us. We know he can navigate all that lies ahead. We miss him more than words can describe, but we, along with countless others, began preparing for that exact moment over 18 years ago. He was ready to be on his own.

When our three boys started at Redeemer, I began to realize that we were given this incredible gift of being their parents, but we were just two members of an important team of people that would help raise them. That meant that my husband and I had to start to let go. It meant getting used to not knowing every detail of their day and understanding they had these little lives that were independent from ours. I had to get used to not being the center of their universe. I quickly learned that this was not just ok – but essential to their development. Providing independence from us and opportunity to make their own mistakes would help them develop the resiliency and problem-solving skills they would need to be on their own. And trust me, as you watch your children make their way through certain stages of life, there is great beauty in not knowing!



You may not realize it now, but you have already started the process of preparing your children for the first time they will leave home to live on their own. The good news is you are not doing it alone. I recently came across a timely quote: "Individually, we are one drop. Together, we are an ocean." At Redeemer, we are thrilled to partner with our students' families and are grateful for the trust you place in us. We are united in our quest to ensure our young students' natural energy and wonder are channeled into true learning opportunities where they are allowed to make mistakes and be joyful, messy, and noisy – the true sights and sounds of learning. Young children are truly a remarkable population. They love with abundance and have an insatiable appetite for learning. They are curious, engaged, and think anything is possible. Our youngest students are open-minded and free of judgement. They are all we hope to be as adults but with much to learn as well. This makes their first school experience so important.

As partners, let's join together as role models. Let's help our children become respectful and kind. Let's teach them to look others in the eye and greet one another by name. Let's put aside the increasing distractions of everyday life like our cell phones and social media to engage in meaningful conversations. Let's step back and allow them to be responsible and independent so they develop confidence and self-worth. Let's not be afraid to address negative behaviors in front of others or offer consequences so they understand limits. Let's be present with our children and one another, offering our attention, trust, and love. Let's teach our children to take the gifts of childhood that they already possess along with them into their adult lives. Together as one, let's partner to give them all they deserve!