

## Love Your Neighbor

Good evening and welcome to the 2025-2026 program year! My name is Mary Knott, and for those I have not yet met, I am fortunate to serve as Redeemer's Head of School. It is my pleasure and honor, alongside my colleagues, to partner with all of you in educating your young children who we know will go on to be our future decision makers and leaders. This is my 17<sup>th</sup> year at Redeemer, and I have spent somewhere north of 25 years in education. Despite how long I have been in the field, I continue to be awed by the responsibility we have as parents, care givers, and teachers in establishing a solid foundation for our youngest learners.

My entire childhood I was told I should be a teacher, but I of course had other ideas. Shortly after my college graduation, I soon realized how right everyone else was and enrolled in a graduate program for teachers at the University of San Francisco, launching my lifelong career in education. Soon thereafter, I pounded the pavement at a time when teaching jobs were scarce. I was truly fortunate to land a fourth-grade position in a wonderful community called the St. Finn Barr School. It was a small school located in Sunnyside, a medium-sized working-class neighborhood in the south-central part of San Francisco.

I learned so much that first year of teaching. I was the sole homeroom, art, science, music and library teacher to my very first class of 36 students. As a 24-year-old fresh out of school, my excitement was palpable, and so was my fear. I knew that establishing expectations and a firm approach in the beginning would be crucial to my success. The Catholic nuns that led St. Finn Barr ran a tight ship, and the expectations for the faculty were high. I really wasn't sure if I was more afraid of them or the 36 students left in my charge!

The first week of school a small group of boys in my class decided to test my authority. I honestly cannot remember what they did. What I do remember was that as a first-year teacher, I needed to make a strong impression, and they needed to know their actions would have consequences. After the incident, each boy was to write a note to his parents explaining his behavior, which was to be returned the next day with a parent's signature confirming receipt. The boys were obviously none too happy about the idea.

The following morning, I called each one up to my desk and was feeling rather successful about how I had managed my first challenge in classroom management. That is until I reached the last student - Aidan O'Flynn, eldest of six. Aidan walked up to my desk with his head down and the note held tightly in his left hand. He unfolded it and handed it to me with a blush. His eyes never met mine. It was immediately obvious that he had forged his mother's signature. There we stood in front of the rest of the class in a standoff. You could hear a pin drop. We had a bit of back and forth. I was trying to give him every opportunity to tell the truth as I silently panicked about what I would do if he didn't. I finally said, "Aidan, I am going to give you one last chance to tell me the truth. I have all the parents' signatures on the sign-in sheet from last night's Parent Orientation, and I can pull out the sheet to compare it with your mother's signature. I'd first like to give you one more opportunity to tell the truth though." Aidan looked up at me with his bright blue eyes and sheepishly sighed, "Ok. It's my dad's signature. He has really bad handwriting!"

Clever boy!!

# Redeemer

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## PARISH DAY SCHOOL

I don't know how, but I eventually got him to tell me the truth about that forged signature. Poor Aidan then had to deal with his mother and several missed soccer games. It was nothing short of earthshattering for this star soccer player. Aidan could have spent the remainder of the year holding a grudge against me and in anger. Instead, it was the beginning of a wonderful relationship. Aidan turned out to be a model student and leader. While I am sure his mother had something to do with it, his resulting respect and kindness towards me and others made our classroom community a much better place.

While the experience definitely made an impression on me regarding classroom management, the larger lesson was to never underestimate children. They can outwit and outsmart you every day of the week. They are also quick to learn from their mistakes and are humble enough to do so. The impact children can have never ceases to amaze me, and it is not lost on me how loved ones and strangers they interact with daily play an invaluable role.

St. Finn Barr served a culturally diverse group of students who had one thing in common. They understood the value of being a good neighbor. I felt it daily.

While Apple TV's "Your Friends and Neighbors" leads us to believe that being neighborly involves things like theft, adultery, and even murder, I prefer to stick with Fred Roger's version of compassion, kindness, and an acceptance of differences. His version includes the effort to make an impact on others' lives without expecting anything in return. It is demonstrating compassion in everyday interactions, whether with our best of friends or the strangers we encounter every day. It is selfless love.

Children are born great neighbors. They have a natural instinct to stand by others, willingly offer their smiles and assistance, and engage without judgement. While they notice similarities and differences, they naturally accept others for who they are. They offer the perfect example of, "Love Your Neighbor – No Exceptions."

Our youngest students interact without preset boundaries, ideas, and beliefs; and it is our job to be role models to ensure they never lose sight of this. As adults in their lives, we need to give them the opportunity to question, think for themselves, and foster their compassion for others. We also need to give them opportunity to make mistakes and fix them on their own. Self-sufficiency, challenge, and failure will give them the conviction to love their neighbors while holding true to who they are.

At Redeemer, we feel privileged to be Baltimore's first full early childhood program. Our model is backed by science and research, and we are proud to experience firsthand the love our students of all ages have for learning and coming to school. Last year we began the quiet phase of our Capital Campaign to help fund a new building for our growing program. We are in the midst of an incredibly exciting time in Redeemer's history. I believe all of us in this room were called together as a community of neighbors to do something important in early childhood education in Baltimore, fulfilling the crucial mission of educating our students in the way they learn best. Childhood is magical. Learning is fun. School must reflect this. We are thrilled about the year ahead when our staff of 31 will educate 170 students, ages 2 through 10, through an educational program that is rooted in the Episcopal church and a history that spans almost 75 years. Early learning sets the foundation for all that lies ahead, and it is our privilege to be your children's first educators!