

Growing Together: St. Andrew's College & Aurora



By Brock Weir

The Auroran continues its Sesquicentennial series on Aurora's oldest businesses with a look at a school which attributes much of its success to relocating to Aurora.

A hush came over the room as men crowded around Kevin McHenry earlier this month to watch the big game.

The St. Andrew's College headmaster was keen to watch his Saints take on their rivals, and wouldn't let an ocean stop him from the streaming game. He was in London, England meeting with alumni and these 'old boys' were equally enthralled with the game.

As headmaster, Mr. McHenry strives to keep alumni engaged with their alma mater. They have gone on to various careers in various industries but the education they received in Aurora is what holds them together.

St. Andrew's College began life in Toronto in 1899. After moving locations a few times, they joined fellow Toronto schools Trinity College and Ridley College in finding new digs outside of the rapidly growing city. While Trinity moved to Port Hope and Ridley to St. Catharines, St. Andrew's established new roots in Aurora in 1926.

'That was probably the best decision we ever made in our 115,' says Mr. McHenry, stating if he was given the choice of establishing a school anywhere in Canada, Aurora would remain his top choice. 'This is the perfect community for this school to be located in. We're close enough but far enough away from Toronto. We have our own identity and autonomy and all those important aspects, but we're within striking distance. We have parents that live and work in York Region and Toronto, and we have access to one of the most multicultural and cosmopolitan cities in the world.'

Long after moving to Aurora, SAC was still a school primarily for boarding students. In the past 30 years, however, things began to significantly shift. Boarders are now almost evenly split with day students, and boarders now come from all parts of the world.

This proximity to Toronto is part of what Mr. McHenry, and Edna Collins, a faculty member of over 25 years focused on alumni, believe is the international appeal.

Aside from their day students, boys enrolled as boarders not only come from across Canada and into the US, but 34 different countries, including Germany, Finland, Kazakhstan, Saudi Arabia, India, Hong Kong, Thailand, Vietnam, Pakistan, Nigeria, and a wide cross-section of the Caribbean.

Mr. McHenry attributes this international appeal both to reputation and word of mouth, but also outreach efforts. This week, for instance, admissions officers will be out promoting the school in Montreal, Bermuda, Saudi Arabia, Kazakhstan, Vietnam and China.

As SAC continues to evolve and its identity becomes known around the world, Mr. McHenry says it would be foolish to simply look ahead without keeping a firm eye on the foundations of the institution.

‘If I was going to discard or not think about the history of the school, traditions, and how we were built, I would last about a week as a headmaster,’ he says. ‘That is front and centre. Principals are always looking at the future and a 50,000 foot vision, but I will be honest and say much of where we go is based on where we have been.’

Adds Ms. Collins: ‘Technologically, we’re probably ahead of the curve of a lot of the independent schools, but our history with the naming on our buildings and how we carry ourselves are very much linked to all those headmasters, teachers, and students who have come before us.’

Mr. McHenry came into St. Andrew's out of the public school stream. Part of the attraction, he said, was a more manageable volume of students, and make changes ‘without jumping over a number of hopes’ to get things done.’ There, he found a school where teaching was seen less as a job, but more of a vocation.

From being on the other side of that fence, it was a unique environment, but also an environment that continues to evolve from a parental perspective. In the last few decades alone, what parents expect from their schools has also significantly shifted.

‘In the 1920s and even through the 1970s, parents would trust the school to raise their son and often the boys would be here for seven or eight years, go home at Christmas and that's it,’ he says. There would be report cards sent home, but not a ton of communication. Now, because of the world we live in and the access to information, there is way more accountability, way more communication, way more expectation from parents, whether they are living on Willow Farm Lane or in San Francisco.

‘Most schools started as boys schools and three decades ago there was a lot of change from boys to coed of like schools and when I said the decision to move to Aurora was the best decision ever made by this, I would say probably the second best decision was to remain all boys and not join the others because we have carved out a very unique niche that serves our students extremely well and we have really become experts in how to educate boys.’

Although they have carved out a niche market on what they believe is a tried and true method of teaching boys, they have also tried to cast a wider net in terms of how many students can actually take part in the program. They don't demure from the fact it is costly and many families ‘struggle’ to pay the tuition, but Mr. McHenry says they currently have 140 boys on financial assistance, making the school community more accessible.

‘\$2.2 million per year goes into financial aid,’ he says. ‘It is a great equalizer and leveller and we're really proud of it. That is through the generosity of the old boys [who] give to the endowment to fund boys who otherwise would not be here.’