

Hundreds bid fond farewell to the 'little school with the big heart'



By Brock Weir

John Mullings only had about five years' teaching experience under his belt when he walked through the doors of George Street Public School for the first time in 1963.

Over the following six years, he instilled in his students a love of discovery and science, even gathering his students together to build flowerbeds outside of the then-relatively new school where they planted tulips. At the time, one of his students asked if the tulips they finished planting would come up again.

'I said, if they are well-planted, they will come again,' he recalls, before adding with a smile, 'that is philosophical talk that might work for people too.'

If there was any doubt in Mr. Mullings' mind before Saturday, it was undoubtedly erased when hundreds of current and former students at George Street Public School returned to say goodbye. Like any teacher, Mr. Mullings aimed to give his kids the best start in life, ensuring they were, if not well-planted, well-grounded in the world around them. And, lo and behold, they came back.

Small in stature, George Street Public School prides itself on being 'the little school with the big heart.' It is not an empty sentiment. For former student Kathleen Mounce, who came back to the school for the first time since graduating to Aurora Senior Public School in 1999, it was very much a part of her life.

'I lost my mom to cancer when I was almost nine years old, so George Street was a huge community that rallied around me and helped take care of her, and took care of me and my sister afterwards,' she said. 'That is a huge part of my life that is nice to revisit.'

Ms. Mounce, accompanied by her friends and friends of her mother, started their day taking in the kindergarten classrooms. This is where they first met 'kids and parents alike' and where, she said, 'it all began.'

'We were really nostalgic,' she said. 'I hope [the students today] can look back on their time here and also recognize how special the community is. They really take to heart the philosophy of little school, big heart, because it is very tight-knit and everyone remembers everyone.'

That was a sentiment which held true for every generation attending the celebration of George Street, ahead of its merger this September with Aurora Senior Public School to form Wellington Public School. Peter Skillins, who started as a kindergarten student there in 1960, had no trouble picking out teachers who were there in those early days, as well as classmates.

'I got absolute goosebumps,' he said of walking through the doors. 'It is really exciting and it brings back a lot of memories. My wife really, really wanted me to come and I was kind of on the fence about it, but in the end I am so happy I am here.'

This happiness was shared by teacher Elsie Adair, a founding faculty member of the school who instantly picked out Peter, and his brother Eric, from the crowd. The Skillins brothers might have had height on their side in that respect, but not when it comes to Ms. Adair.

‘I am just very excited to see all my kids and reconnect with parents,’ she said. ‘The most rewarding aspect of teaching was the association with the kids and I was telling a fellow teacher that is the only part I really, really miss. I never wanted to supply teach because that is too brief. I wanted to know my kids.’

As George Street packs up for their big move at the end of the school year, Principal Ken Arnott will be among those helping to make sure the transition is as smooth as possible. Speaking to the crowds before the current crop of students performed a farewell song co-penned by former student and musician Glenn Marais, Mr. Arnott marvelled at the turnout.

‘It is amazing when you have an event like this how you start to reminisce and how you start to reconnect and I think it is great that in this age of social media that people can still get together, face to face, and say, ‘I remember you.’ That is what this celebration is all about. It is saying goodbye, but also reconnecting.’

Added Anna DeBartolo, Chair of the York Region District School Board: ‘It is so overwhelming and it is always about the kids. It is wonderful to see that the school spirit will continue on in their memories forever.’

