

Our Lady of Grace C.E.S. gears up for 60th anniversary



By Brock Weir

As an elementary school athlete, Jo-Ann Smith remembers hopping on the bus to play off against students from local Catholic schools.

With 35 years as a teacher now under her belt, she is marking her 28th year teaching at Aurora's Our Lady of Grace Catholic Elementary School (OLG).

As a teacher, she has seen her daughter come through the Aurora Heights Drive school, has watched her grandson take his first educational steps as a current kindergarten student at the school, is preparing to see her granddaughter follow in his footsteps this fall, and now she is helping shape the school as it prepares for a momentous milestone on Sunday, May 1.

This year, Our Lady of Grace Catholic Elementary School will celebrate its 60th anniversary, and plans are now underway to celebrate the occasion in style.

According to parent councillor Eric Poblete, who is helping lead the celebrations, they knew as soon as they realised the 60th anniversary was approaching that it was a matter of go big or go home.

"This is a great way to bring not only the school community, but past school communities as well, back into the environment to celebrate," says Mr. Poblete. "The initial thought was we would have a large event at the end of the spring. The initiative came about that way, plus with the [York Catholic District School Board]. Elizabeth Crowe, the Chair at the time, indicated to us there should be a large celebration. Certainly with this school being the oldest in their board, they wanted it to be done in the proper way. Towards the end of last year, she contacted us and said, 'Be prepared! We're going to start fixing the school and repairing it because we expect to have a fairly public and high exposure of the school.'"

May was ideal, he added, because it coincides with their end-of-the-year festivities as well as Education Week within the Board.

"We had a date, combined that event with this event, and now we have been taking a lot of parent and teacher volunteers to try and coordinate this," says Mr. Poblete.

There has been no shortage of enthusiasm on either front with parents and teachers alike eager to get the ball rolling.

"We have always had a lot of support from the parents," says Ms. Smith.

The feeling is mutual, adds Vicky Yaeck, whose own children recently graduated from OLG.

“As a volunteer, we always felt welcomed by the teachers, which is very important because there are a lot of schools where the teachers aren't as welcoming. It feels like a community when you walk into the school. The kids feel it and it is an all-round good feeling.”

Ms. Yaeck's eyes well up when she speaks of this “community” in action, particularly recalling her daughter winning an award for oral communication. Her learning, says Ms. Yaeck, has been something of a struggle.

“This was a huge milestone for her,” she says. “It wouldn't have happened without the teachers.”

This school year marks the second time around Ines Donato has been a part of the OLG community. First coming through their doors 11 years ago as Vice Principal, she returned this year to take the helm as Principal and is excited to have had the chance to be a part of the celebrations.

The first priority, she says, is starting the celebration with a mass, which is set for 2 p.m. at Our Lady of Grace Catholic Church on Yonge Street. Following the service, the party heads over to the school for formal presentation, themed rooms, and a student performance of a specially-penned song.

“I feel like I have come full circle,” says Ms. Donato of her second go-round at OLG. “I also live in the community and it is wonderful to be in church on Sundays and really have that sense of community that is within our faith and everyone coming together based on our belief in Jesus. It is exciting and it is also a challenge. I am a little anxious about all the things we would like to do for this anniversary, but I know we're going to work and it is going to be a really exciting day.”