



# Life in a Church School

*Church school has many advantages. One of the good things about our school is that the teacher doesn't have to hurry around so much because there's not as many kids having questions at the same time, and the younger kids that have questions can ask kids that are older than them.*

*Some of the things I like to do in church school are go to the library downtown, have Bible quizzes, and have movies. I like the stories we read like *Unleashed*, *The Pearl*, and *The Little Missionary Truck That Could Do Anything*.*

*I really don't see why all the kids from other schools say school is boring. The subjects aren't boring, the playtime isn't boring. I'm in a church and in a church school they teach you to be thankful that you have a church school to go to. — Andy Nash, 9.*

When I was a student there, the Detroit Lakes [Minnesota] Seventh-day Adventist Church School [now the Detroit Lakes Adventist Christian School] was just down the hall from the Detroit Lakes Seventh-day Adventist Church, across from the bathrooms and the water fountain. We had two classrooms, which on the weekends we allowed the adults to use for Sabbath school, but we hated when they opened our desks—we had personal stuff in there. Couldn't they bring their own pencils?

In the late 1970s, there was a movement among the school board to update the name of the school. Not only was the Detroit Lakes Seventh-day Adventist Church School a cumbersome name, but many thought it might perplex some non-Adventists in town who wanted to send their child to a country Christian school like on *Little House on the Prairie*, but who didn't know what to think about the name "Seventh-day Adventist."

"Do you think they will try to convert Sarah to their religion?"

a hypothetical wife would ask her hypothetical husband.

"Well, I don't know," he would say. "Do you?"

And then, deciding that the risks were too high, they would send Sarah to public school instead.

But, if the school had a less conspicuous name, Sarah's parents might be more likely to send her there. They came up with several alternatives. The two finalists were Meadow Vista Christian School and Mountain Vista Christian School. (Everyone liked the word *Vista*.) After hours of heated debate, the board could not reach a consensus. Plus, some key members couldn't quite shake the feeling that by dropping the word *Adventist*, we might be forfeiting our heritage. So they threw out the whole idea and decided to retain the original name: the Detroit Lakes Seventh-day Adventist Church School.

I was disappointed. "Hello, Detroit Lakes Seventh-day Adventist Church School, may I help you?" was a mouthful when the hall phone rang. We would race to get it.

B Y A N D Y N A S H

By “we,” I mean the cast of the church school: the big kids (grades 5-8), taught by Mr. Rogers, and the little kids (grades 1-4), taught by Mom. But I didn’t call her Mom; I called her Mrs. Nash. (I wanted everything to be as fair as possible.) Mrs. Nash made us write a lot of “themes,” no matter how much we rolled our eyes and complained because, she said, we’d be grateful later on. She’d write a topic sentence on the board, such as “Every student in my classroom has good qualities” and then ask us to finish it.

“Do we really have to write another theme, Mrs. Nash?”

“Yes, you do,” she said, laughing. “Now get to it.”

*Every student in my classroom has good qualities. Jac is good at football and baseball. But Larry is good at soccer and basketball. Micky helps people and is good at art. Jenny helps people, too, but Jenny is good at naming capitals. Debbie shares and obeys the teacher. Rocky has good sportsmanship and shares, too. And last of all, Val is good at, Val is good at, I can’t think of what Val is good at. I suppose Val is good at Bible. So everybody in the room is good at something except, oh forget it.—Andy Nash, 7.*

Actually, Val was good at a lot of things. I just teased her because she could take it. Learning to take it comes with the territory in a multigrade school. If you don’t, you’re in for a miserable year. The big kids would see to that.

The big kids got to do a lot of things. They got to repeat the JMV [Junior Missionary Volunteer] Law, which meant that they would be a servant of God and a friend to man, walk softly in the sanctuary, keep a song in their hearts, and go on God’s errands. It sounded neat the way they said it. Our pledge was more straightforward: Be true, be kind, be faithful, be obedient, and things like that. We recited our pledges every Monday morning in the junior room downstairs—boys sat on the left, girls on the right. We didn’t have to sit that way; we wanted to. Occasionally a boy would stray to the right, which was disappointing. But he always found his way back, and we accepted him with open arms.

I never strayed to the right. Even if I had wanted to stray, I wouldn’t have—Mom would see me and discover my secret: Girls weren’t as gross as I said they were. I sat in the left front so I could see. Being the shortest student in the whole school could, I suppose, have been a real downer. No 2nd-grade boy likes to have a 5-inch gap between his height line on the wall and the other lines—two of which belonged to 2nd-grade *girls*, Debbie and Rocky.

Most everyone had a nickname in church school, and it didn’t take long for me to get mine: “Shorts.” Eric “Erki” Klein, the biggest kid in the school, made it up. Everyone laughed their heads off when he said it. At first, I was embarrassed, but after a few days, I got used to the name and even grew to like it. “Way to go, Shorts,” the big kids would yell on the playground, and it made me want to run all the faster. With a name like “Shorts,” the only place you could go was up.

Erki sat behind me. He pulled my chair back half way and let me try to balance it in mid-air during announcements. We had

to stand, though, to say the Pledge of Allegiance while two students—never me—unfolded the flag that two other students—never me—had folded perfectly the previous Friday. “See, Andy,” they had said earlier that year, “only the blue section is supposed to show. Want to try again?” I didn’t. Who cares if the stripes showed a little? I mean, were we suddenly prone to a Russian attack just because I hadn’t folded the American flag perfectly?

Pastor Heglund, who had slipped in the back door during the flag-unfolding, then came forward for our worship talk. A small man with white hair combed straight back, Pastor Heglund was a true “servant of God, and a friend to man.” His voice was soothing as he shared his thoughts, which often included a selection from Paul Harvey. It was hard, though, to fully enjoy Pastor Heglund’s talk because all we were thinking about was when he would ask us to raise our hands. He *always* asked us to raise our hands, a scaled-down altar call in which everyone was expected to participate. “And so,” Pastor Heglund said, “[Someone] never forgot her experience with [something], and she promised herself that she would [positive act] the next chance she got. How many of you want to do the same thing?” And we’d all raise our hands.

After worship, we raced up the red stairs, the little kids to their classroom, the big kids to theirs; we would see them again at noon hour. “Bye, Erki,” I said.

“See ya, Shorts,” he said and laughed his way into his classroom.

“OK,” said Mrs. Nash. “I’d like you to spend a little time working on your next vocabulary assignment, and while you do, I’ll be reviewing your Iowa Tests of Basic Skills results with you individually . . .” And for the next few hours, we became smarter people.

By noon hour, though, we were ready to give our expanding minds a break. A herd of elephants down the stairs, we scarfed down our sandwiches as fast as we could and gathered for our noon-hour activity, which was highly dependent upon the weather. The first few weeks of winter you couldn’t keep us inside even if you tried. Snow meant sledding, and sledding meant Indian Hill. It took 10 minutes to walk there—we passed the time by whipping snowballs at each other: “Hey, you guys, stop throwing ice! That hurt!”—but it was worth the journey.

Indian Hill was the king of sledding runs: dangerously steep, probably 88 or 89 degrees, and as fast as you’d ever want to go. As soon as you hurtled off the top, you had to begin braking with your hands; otherwise, you’d fly into the far woods someplace, never to be heard from again. They’d find you during a building project next century, your face forever frozen in elation. Not a bad way to go out, really.

Still, below-zero temperatures and ice chunks that get inside your mittens and freeze your wrists lose appeal after a while, and by January, we were back inside playing floor hockey in the fellowship hall, unless it was being used by the Dorcas Society, in which case we were upstairs playing Risk, Monopoly, or Electric Football.

Electric Football, a game in which your team of little plastic

players moves to the rhythm of a vibrating board, was unmatched in excitement. You never knew where your man was going to go. He could be racing up the field, just five yards from the end zone—then, without warning, do the hokey pokey, turn himself around, and dash the other direction. Unfortunately, the game was also unmatched in controversy. For a player to be tackled, his sliding base had to be touched by another player's sliding base. But sometimes the ball carrier was vibrating along so fast that it was tough to tell whether contact had been made.

"He touched."

"No, he didn't."

"Yes, he did. Debbie, did you see it? Tell him he touched."

By early March, most of the snow had melted, and we were ready to let our plastic football teams have some time off—they had worked hard—and play the game ourselves. Mr. Rogers played with us. He was all-time quarterback—friend one minute, foe the next. He'd bark the signals, just like on TV. "Down . . . set . . . hike!" and we'd all run around like maniacs, doing everything we could to lose our defender.

On this day, though, Mr. Rogers had to run a quick errand in town. The minute he left, John Umber surprised all of us by suggesting that we switch from touch football to tackle football, which he described as a "real man's game."

"Hey, yeah!" said a couple kids.

"Hey, yeah!" said a couple more.

I didn't want to be the only wimp. "Hey, yeah!" I said.

Before I knew what was happening, the kickoff was sailing right at me. I fled five yards to the right. The wind compensated.

"It's yours, Shorts!" someone yelled.

The ball arrived just a split second before the kickoff team. I cut left, an end run, but Danny had closed off the corner. A couple of my teammates tried to block, but they were steamrolled by the enthusiastic mob. It's not every day you get to smear a 2nd grader.

Reversing field, I dodged Jenny, then shook off Jac. Just as I was gaining confidence, I saw him—Erki!

He lumbered toward me, a mountain on the move. Daylight disappeared. I hugged the ball and lowered my head . . .

*Whoomp!*

What had happened! I wasn't sure. My head hurt a little, but I was still standing—*still alive*. I spun around, but no one was even paying attention to me. They were all huddled around Erki, who was crawling around on his hands and knees. He seemed to be searching for something.

"You knocked his tooth out!" someone yelled.

*What? Erki's tooth?*

"It's his front one," said someone else. "It's bleeding!"

After school, I still couldn't believe what had happened. "It's bleeding!" had sent me bolting from the scene. For more than an hour, I hid in the tall grass behind the soccer field while everyone looked for me. "Where are you, Shorts?" they called out impatiently, but I didn't answer. I didn't know what to say. Finally, I decided that if they called out just once more, I would

stand up and show myself. But no one called.

I returned to class in the middle of Bible. I squeaked open the door and everyone looked up in unison. Most of them seemed glad to see me—if they hadn't, I would have run away again. Maybe for good. A 2nd grader can only carry so much sorrow at a time.

They told me the news. Erki was OK. He had found his tooth and *stuck it back in his mouth*. The dentist had called from downtown to say that the tooth had been saved. The roots had taken hold. Erki's parents had also called to say that he wasn't mad at me and neither were they, but that they hoped we had all learned a good lesson. We had.

Still, I felt lousy. Not just because I'd knocked out my buddy's tooth but because I'd fled, a gutless criminal at large. I could have at least stuck around long enough to help.

By 3:45, all the kids except the Stutzmans had caught their rides so I just sat on the sidewalk and watched Todd fry ants with his magnifying glass and say "Decent!" while I waited for Mom. Todd always said "Decent!" when he liked something. By the end of the year, we were all saying, "Decent!" He'd herd a few ants onto the middle of the sidewalk with his notebook, then catch the sun with his magnifying glass and execute them one by one.

"Decent!" he said. The ants didn't seem to think it was all that decent.

A few minutes later, Mrs. Nash came clicking outside, her arms full of papers to grade. Seeing her made my throat get tight, as it had been when Erki was crawling around the grass. I hadn't had a chance to talk to her about the accident, and I was anxious to get home so she could hug me while I cried.

"How about you and I swing by Dairy Queen on the way?" she said.

My throat loosened a little. The idea had potential.

"Can I get a Peanut Buster Parfait?" I asked.

"Only if I can," she said.

We hopped in the van and drove away, teacher and student, mother and son. ☺

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*This article is adapted from Chapter 7 in the book, Growing Up Adventist: A Fond Look Back at the Church That Taught Me Faith, Love, and Laughter (Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1997), and is used by permission from Pacific Press Publishing Association® and the author.*

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