Leaving a Legacy

Editor’s Note: Tom Eastwood has an unusual distinction. As an elementary principal for 14 years and a middle/high school principal for three years, he has counted among his students not only his children but his grandchildren as well. We asked him to reflect on what this experience has meant to him personally and to his career as a principal.

Q: When did you first have a family member in your school?
A: It was in 1977, when I began my career as principal at K-6 Kalama Elementary School in southwest Washington. In one of my kindergarten classes sat my oldest daughter, a quiet, dark-haired girl named Stephanie. Two years later, my younger daughter Erin also entered kindergarten.

Q: What was it like to have your daughters in your school?
A: I found that having them start school under my watch to be very comforting. I was able to observe them in their classrooms, which most parents cannot do, and to provide some parental input for their teachers. For the girls, having their father as principal seemed pretty normal. Stephanie says she didn’t feel the first day was as scary as it probably was for most kids, because I was there. Erin says that she doesn’t recall the first day being any different from other day, except that it was hectic and exciting.

Q: Did you ever have any problems with them?
A: I can honestly say that I didn’t have any disciplinary issues with Stephanie or Erin. I remember them being great helpers around the school. But Erin says that she remembers one incident. It was a day when she tried to walk home at lunchtime, which was against the rules. When she rounded the corner and saw me outside, unloading some wood, she quickly ran back to school—only to find that another girl had reported her for leaving school property. That cost her all recesses and a week of in-school suspension. She never did that again.

Q: How did your daughters’ presence affect your work?
A: Listening to my children’s viewpoints of school activities or situations gave me a much clearer perspective. It made it possible for me to communicate with students in new ways or provide activities that might not have occurred to me otherwise.

Q: What changed for you and for them when they left elementary school?
A: Stephanie says that things didn’t change much when they moved to middle and high school. Since our school district is all on one campus, I was in and out of the middle/high school all the time anyway. Erin says, “I don’t think I was ever out from under your eye until I went to college.”

Q: Was there ever a time when you weren’t involved in their education?
A: Not really! In 1985, I was Stephanie’s 8th-grade volleyball coach. This was a great way for me to help her develop her athletic abilities while I was learning how to coach volleyball. Two years later, I was Erin’s 8th-grade volleyball coach as well. When Erin began her senior year of high school, I was her varsity volleyball coach. By that time, I had made a tough but rewarding decision to return to the classroom. I began teaching third grade in 1988 and then moved to the middle/high school to teach English, psychology and pre-algebra in 1989. Erin was in my junior English class and she was an excellent student.

Q: How did having your children in their classes affect your teachers?
A: I think it’s difficult for a teacher to have a principal’s child in their class, and it sometimes puts the kids in the middle. I remember having a conference with Erin’s seventh-grade social studies teacher to discuss ways to help her study for tests. I think it was a positive experience for my wife and me. After our discussion, we were able to follow through successfully at home.

Q: What did you do after your daughters left?
A: I taught a variety of classes at the middle/high school until 1999, when I became the assistant principal and athletic director. In 2001, I retired. But in August of that year I was approached with the offer to return to Kalama Elementary as a half-time Spanish and physical education teacher—and I accepted. One of the children in my second-grade PE classes was my oldest grandson, Tanner. The next year, I was asked to be the school’s interim principal. When the principal chose not to return after taking medical leave, I was again offered my old position. Two years later, as I complete my fourteenth year as Kalama Elementary’s principal, I feel fortunate to have my youngest grandson and my granddaughter as students.

Q: Reflecting on a long career that has seen your children and grandchildren as students, how would you describe the impact of this unusual experience?
A: Having had two daughters and three grandchildren in my school has certainly provided important milestones in my 27 years with the Kalama School District. In that time, I have seen many superintendents, principals, and staff come and go. I have seen curriculum changes, state requirements, instructional styles, and expectations introduced, adjusted, and discarded. I have seen some curriculum areas that still need to be addressed because students are not meeting standards. This has given me the challenge of...
writing, promoting, and evaluating a three-year school improvement plan before I retire in 2006. I feel that my grandchildren’s future and the future of other children is in my hands. It’s one thing to be responsible for everyone else’s children, but it’s another when they are your own flesh and blood.

Q. What do your daughters recall about having you as their principal?

A. When I asked Stephanie, she said, “Having you as principal, teacher, and coach was a privilege. Not very many kids get to spend that amount of time with their dad.” But she noted, “Everyone always thought that you had it better because your dad was principal. You always had to prove yourself, always be on your best behavior...I find myself still trying to be the best at whatever I am doing even though my dad isn’t my employer, so I guess it helped form my internal drive.”

Erin said, “By the time I went to college, I had formed my personality and had the drive and determination that you had instilled in me. I couldn’t be a rebel if I tried.”

Q. What do you appreciate most about your career?

A. In looking back at all the student lives I have touched since 1970, it’s easy to see the five students on whom I feel I have had, and will continue to have, the most influence. I am so proud of Stephanie and Erin and the women, wives, and parents they have become. I know I can really retire in a few more years, knowing that I have given them, as well as parents, students, teachers, and staff, all I could throughout my career.

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