

## **Thanks.**

*By Kelly Parker*

I've been a parent for 14 years. You'd think I would know better by now.

I don't know why I keep getting blindsided by these kinds of things, but it happened again a couple of weeks ago with the emotionally draining 'farewell assembly' for my youngest and her fellow grade 4 students, who are finished their tenure at Whyte Ridge Elementary School, and will now move on to HGI Middle School next year.

I walked into the gym expecting a few songs and some parting words from the principal, video camera in hand to capture a moment or two for posterity. However, when Principal Toogood took the microphone, he asked for a show of hands from parents who were seeing their last child wrapping up their time at WRE. That's when it all hit me, and likely every other parent who hoisted up a hand: This school hasn't just meant a lot to the kids who have spent half of their young lives developing within its walls, it's meant a great deal to their parents, too. Not only was it my daughter's last official function as a student at the school, it was the last time I would be here as well.

The first thing that struck me—not unexpectedly—was how quickly the time has gone by since I brought my daughter to the front door of the school to line up for her first day of kindergarten. But that was followed by a cascade of memories of the school, beginning with the summer evening 10 years ago when their mom and I gathered with other parents in this gym for kindergarten orientation when our firstborn started here (“Kindergarten! Didn't we just bring her home from the hospital?!”). I fondly recalled all those times over the years that I had rushed over from work on a frostbite-friendly December night to cram into that gym for Christmas concerts, the mornings that I stumbled, half asleep after a late night at work—coffee “urn” in hand—to stand along the back wall for countless assemblies like this one. First and last days of school. Kids dropped off and picked up. Forgotten lunches delivered. Science Fairs. Sprites, Brownies, and then Girl Guide meetings in the school. On the clock of life, minute markers all, centred around a building that is more a community gathering place than simply a school; students, staff and parents coming together for this event or that.

The over-arching sentiment I found myself feeling however, was gratitude. The staff here had welcomed my kids into their care every weekday for the past decade. Their job titles read “teacher”, or “psychologist”, or “principal” or “administrative assistant”, but that barely scratches the surface of what these indispensable people do with and for our kids every day. They were the ones who—as our daily stand-ins—soothed skinned knees, hurt feelings or sick stomachs, then made the call and handed over the phone when Mom or Dad's voice was the one thing little ears really needed to hear. They were the ones who went above and beyond their job description to form a lunchtime chess club, or gathered excited kids in the school field and struggled to control them all as the model rockets they'd built in the rocketry club took off into the wild blue yonder (hopefully). Nobody put an eye out, and the lessons learned were invaluable. What the kids thought they were learning was the rules of the game, or how to read assembly instructions. In truth they

were learning about winning and losing, friendship (and sometimes betrayal), hope and disappointment, and possibility. Always possibility. They were learning about Life.

While they guided our kids inside the school, staff sometimes helped them adapt to events happening outside the school in their own homes. For any parents dealing with the realities of separation and divorce, the good fortune of having the assistance of a caring and discreet staff of professionals keeping an eye on our kids as their moms and dads navigated life's sometimes rough waters provided great comfort through our own trials. At times, tragedy caused by fearsome illness or accident encroached on the lives of both students and staff of the school. In those cases, the school community closed protectively around it's own.

Standing at the back of the gym, my thoughts suddenly overrun with all of this, I considered thanking the staff of the school with a gift basket of some kind, but it didn't seem personal enough. What I decided instead was to speak to both Principal Toogood and the school psychologist after the assembly.

I'd like to take this opportunity to say now what I found I was barely able to choke out then:

Thank you for watching over my girls.

Thank you for everything.

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