

(October 2009)

I have often pictured what that meeting was like 50 years ago- the one in which 4 families made the decision to go forward with the Vineland Elementary School, what we know today as Ellison. I like to imagine that they had been meeting and talking for month after month- tossing around ideas about education over coffee or while sitting on a park bench watching their children play. I believe too, that if Dan and Lisa Falasca had been parents at that time and in that place, there would have been five families at the table instead of four.

I wonder what they saw in their children's faces when they looked at them and knew they could give them something more. Those of you who chose to send your children to Ellison must see the same thing in their faces. History links us in strange, sometimes small ways, and this feeling of wanting more for our children connects us all.

I wonder from where the perseverance swelled as they searched out opportunities for a better education and researched the best methods for feeding their children's intellectual desires and curiosities. I wonder if it came down to a single moment and which of them was first to say, "Let's do it".

I like to imagine that, in fact, it was an evening meeting at one of the homes of the four- with the parents sitting around a table voicing their last reservations and then pushing through the silence and doubt to make a personal, final commitment to go forward. That commitment, however it was made, in whatever moment, and under whatever circumstance has brought us all together. We are bound, at least for tonight, by their decision- not just to want something better for their children but to act on that

desire. That desire is meaningless without action is no small part of the legacy they leave.

Once made, what has that decision meant for us over the past 50 years?

It is a deep happiness that swells in me when my former students walk back through the doors of Ellison. Mrs. Kinkade has taken to showing up in my doorway and saying, "One of your babies is here". When I hear those words, I am filled. Less than two weeks ago, two of our former students showed up. And I can tell you, that even when they are 6'5" and almost 30 years old, they remain my babies- our babies. As teachers, we may last have sat next to them in a classroom years ago. But they come back. And when people wonder, what is so unique about Ellison? That's it. It's our students who show up at Ellison peering in the doors, looking for their teachers- *decades* later. It's these students who continue to astound us when we think back to all the potential they had- and all they have done with it.

Recently, Mrs. Koons and Ms. D'Esposito have taken to telling me stories about how Ellison is haunted. I think it might be some strange sort of administrator hazing that they have cooked up. Once they feel they have spooked me, they probably go back to their offices and laugh about it. If you know me, you know it doesn't take much to convince me that spirits are around- I think Mrs. Hynes could back me up on this one. But now, I am able to consider the idea of Ellison spirits more rationally. And I think there likely is a spirit at Ellison- or, better said, a collection of spirits. In this case, however, it's not Bloody Mary. If there truly is an Ellison spirit in the building, it is the convergence of those who have passed- those who treasured Ellison and worked and advocated for the school and who loved it so dearly that they are loathe to let it go.

I believe completely that, back to the kitchen table meeting, the original four must have known that the teachers they chose for their undertaking would be the bedrock, of their endeavor. Whatever they did to select their original teachers set the standard for the next fifty years. Many things have been changed, started, and ended, but the superiority of the faculty- their abilities in the classroom, their professionalism, their commitment to our students has remained steadfast. Teachers continue to be the foundation- the garden if you will- of all we do, of all we accomplish and of all we are able to give our students. All is indeed well in the garden today.

I could easily regale you with all sorts of Ellison stories- tender, joyful, painful, and endearing. But they are not unique to me- any one of the faculty could do the same. I will simply assure you that those stories exist in all of us- past and present. We are the keepers of the stories. The teachers. The heads of school. The board members. The parents. The students. We are all connected. We are all imminent spirits who will live at Ellison someday.

If this special time is a bellwether of what the years ahead hold for Ellison, we are poised for a magnificent future. I have chosen a poem by William Stafford to mark 50 years of excellence and serve as the benediction for the next 50 which begin now:

Starting here, what do you want to remember?

How sunlight creeps along a shining floor?

What scent of old wood hovers, what softened sound from outside fills the air?

Will you ever bring a better gift for the world

Than the breathing respect that you carry

Wherever you go right now? Are you waiting

For time to show you some better thoughts?

When you turn around, starting here, lift this

New glimpse that you found; carry into evening  
All that you want from this day. This interval you spent  
Reading or hearing this, keep it for life-  
What can anyone give you greater than now,  
Starting here, right in this room, when you turn around?

Ellison began with four families who laid the foundation for excellence. I don't know if they thought quite this far ahead, but I believe that while Ellison has grown and matured, they would still yet be able to recognize the school they imagined and crafted in what we are today. And so my wanderings lead me to and leave me here- privileged to be with you and steadfast in my belief that we have held fast to the founding families' original vision, have remained true to their mission, and have become diligent stewards of their legacy.