

*Punched in the Nose!*  
7/31/2020

# *From The Principal's Pen*

As a youngster growing up in Hazelwood, I led a pretty simple life. I would wake up late, watch TV from the couch until nine. I would then spend the rest of the morning cruising the greater metropolis of Hazelwood. I stayed with my grandmother while my mom worked. Mom worked as the Hazelwood school secretary and bookkeeper. I know “secretary” is no longer a politically correct term, but in the early 80s, that is what they were called. Granny’s house was a block from the school, so I was free to roam the majority of town, so long as I didn’t cause any trouble. It’s a little crazy today to think of seeing a seven or eight-year-old free to roam town on his own.

My summer mornings were filled with adventure. I would check in with mom and make sure she didn’t need anything. That was just an excuse for being in the building as the gym was quite a distance from the office, and I knew I could play basketball in the gym as long as I didn’t disturb anyone that might be working. From there, it was to the post office to check the mail. To this day, I still love the smell of an old post office. I would drop into Hazelwood Hardware and visit with Toot Nichols. This was the place I would come after I had saved up enough money to buy my first pocket knife, and I can still see the enormous moose head on the wall. While I am sure it was big, it looked the size of an elephant to a young boy. I would wrap up most mornings with a stop at the pharmacy. The Hazelwood Pharmacy had a flat grill and a lunch counter, and if I was lucky, my aunt would fix me a grilled cheese and a real cherry coke. Sometimes I had to settle for two pieces of three-cent gum. It depended on what change I had in my pocket and how pitiful and hungry I looked! This was the early 80s, and the Cubs still had to play home day games because they didn’t have lights at Wrigley Field. I would try and get back to Granny’s by 1:35, so I could watch Ryne Sandberg, and the beloved Cubs find a way to break my heart like they so often did. I had a blessed childhood.

As I think back to growing up in Hazelwood, so many of my best memories came because those around me put me in a safe environment where trust was always far greater than the fear that something terrible was about to happen. Trust was currency and was never in short supply.

But there were times in my childhood where the trust bank emptied and anxiety took over. In the late summer of 1979, my mom woke me up early and told me to get dressed. She was taking me to something called preschool. “Mom, I don’t want to go to preschool. Let me go to Granny’s.” She insisted, and my morning routine was brought to a sudden halt. I was dragged to the car, threatened within an inch of my life that I would behave, and told that they would bring me back home at lunchtime. This did not seem to be a place I would want to spend much time. Mom walked me in the front door of the First Methodist Preschool building and introduced me to my teacher. My teacher told me, “Everything is going to be fine. You will make friends and have fun.” As Mom walked away, I felt the anxiety building up. My trust was at an all-time low, and I had an ample supply of worry for me and any other student that might need it. Within a few minutes, worry had

turned to anger, “How could my mom love me and still leave me in this horrible place?” The teacher must have detected my frustration. She came over and got down on my level. “You will be fine. This is a great place.” I had had enough at that point, and no sweet words would convince me otherwise. Before she could move away, I rared back and punched her square in the nose with everything I had.

It was not my finest academic achievement, and I am not proud of it, to say the least. Let me make myself clear; I am not condoning my actions in any way. But, in the past few months, many of our students and some parents have been faced with the same type of moment. We have all found ourselves in a place where the trust that everything is going to be ok has been completely overwhelmed by the anxiety of our current situation. It has not been fun, and it has not been easy. As we start back to school this fall, it will look different. Some students will be remote, while others might choose to return to the building at some point. Regardless of what it looks like, we will all be faced with moments where we must fight back the urge to rare back and punch someone or something because our anxiety has overwhelmed the trust that things will get better.

Relationships are more important than they have ever been for us as a school, as a community, and as a society as a whole. We realize that your trust in us is critical to making school work, and we will do everything we can to create a safe environment where students can grow. We hope that eventually, we can have students back in the building and return to something that looks somewhat like it did a year ago. We realize that all of you will not be ready to come back at the same time. We will help you work through your hesitations and anxiety, and build the trust necessary to do this well.

As with most of my childhood memories, this preschool story has a happy ending. In the end, I loved my teacher and enjoyed the experience. I still see my teacher around town, and she is always quick to remind me of my first day of preschool. Eventually, the anxiety left, and trust returned. I know that this season has made us all feel like we have been punched in the nose! Most of us know well the nubbing sensation and awkward smell of taking one directly on the sniffer. Our students have felt it. Parents have felt it. We have all felt it. I have to continue to believe that this gets better. Our anxiety and worry over this season will pass, and just like my preschool experience, we will be better and stronger because of what we have experienced. This story will have a happy ending for all of us.