

Small School, Big Dreams

IT WAS A BRIGHT, SUNNY DAY, FULL OF HOPE AND PROMISE as I drove up to my new school; nevertheless, I felt apprehensive. After 25 years of teaching, I was about to embark on a journey I had vowed never to repeat.

Why was I starting over in a new school in a different state—and in a community where I really didn't know anyone? Once again, I would have to be both school principal and

full-time multigrade teacher of a small-town Adventist school that was about to close its doors due to lack of enrollment and mounting debt.

Twenty-three years earlier, I had tackled a similar job. Now, as I stood in front of my new school pondering the future, I couldn't help thinking how much younger I was the first time I had a job like this. At 48 years old, had I been wise to move away from "mainstream" Adventist education to a small failing school on a Pa-

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cific island? But as I considered all the miraculous signs and "coincidences" that had led me to this moment, I thought that surely God must be in this.

As I surveyed the school building, I couldn't help noticing how worn out and used up it looked from years of neglect in the tropical sun. The contrast between the top-of-the-line school with all the bells and whistles where I had just finished 13 years of teaching and what stood before me was shocking. From my vantage point, this school looked like "mission impossible."

I knew this new assignment would put all my training and experience to the test, and I was convinced more than ever that all I could do was rely on God. I asked Him to provide me with the knowledge, confidence, and help I needed to get the job done for His glory and purpose.

Although I didn't recoil at challenges, I understood that accomplishing lasting change in this school and church community would require more than just hard work. It would need a huge amount of divine intervention, as well as collaboration among all of the stakeholders of the institution. I prayed that I would not be the weak link in the chain of events necessary to transform this school into a shining example of what God can achieve through those who are willing to be used for His purposes.

A few days after my arrival, the new conference president was making his rounds, getting acquainted with all of the workers. We met with the local pastor in one of the classrooms of the old, rundown school building. As the door swung open, we were assaulted by the pungent aroma of mold

mixed with dust that is peculiar to this part of the world. Sitting amid stacks of old chairs, desks, and library books, we discussed the future of the school, the mission of the church, and the possibilities technol-

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John Terada, Maui Adventist School treasurer and volunteer ukelele teacher, works on the computer lab.

ogy offered to change the way we work and witness.

I quickly saw that the conference president and I shared a common desire to help as many young people as possible to access Christian education. It was a good start to a meaningful relationship.

During our meeting, a hot wind blew through the classroom windows, rattling the fluorescent lights so violently that they seemed likely to fall on us. As the conference president surveyed the old, dilapidated school, I saw a look of understanding mixed with sympathy and kindness that reassured me. I felt convinced that he would personally and collectively mobilize conference resources to assist every student who desired to attend an Adventist school. After we talked, I knew I had made the right choice in coming to this school.

The Transformation Begins

Now it was time to get to work. How should I organize and set priorities for the tasks ahead of me? What should I do first? I really didn't know anyone in the community; therefore, I didn't know who I could count on for support, encouragement, or assistance. This was definitely not a one-man job. Since it was God's school and His church, success was His responsibility. I was willing to do my part, but He would definitely have to do His part if this school was to become a shining light for the community—a learning center of which all could be proud, and one that would effectively become an outreach to the community.

A week after I arrived, we had our first school

board meeting. The members voted to split the two classrooms into three rooms by knocking out a wall and creating a computer lab. This project, though it proved a challenge to accomplish before school started,

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became a galvanizing force that united the Adventist community for the good of the school. The nearly 50-year-old school had not been remodeled since it was built, so this renovation was a big deal for the church

The author and his students.

community, for whom change was usually a slow, drawn-out process.

I saw the construction of a computer lab as an essential element—not only in the revitalization of the school, but also in reaching out to the community through adult-education classes. As I began to share my vision with the church constituency and to seek a consensus from them about the way their school fit into the mission of the local and worldwide church, others came forward who shared the dream of our school becoming a community-resource learning center. This really paved the way, so that when it was time to implement the computer lab project, we had tremendous support from the three constituent churches and the conference administration.

During the summer of 1999, I worked six days a week for 12 to 14 hours a day to build the lab. On the seventh day, I preached in the three constituent churches to help build the necessary consensus to accomplish the shared goals of the school and the church. Church members and parents showed up many evenings, working together until late at night because they believed in what we were trying to accomplish. Many people donated time, labor, and funds to see the dream realized. A core

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group of two parents and two church members came after work every day and really made the project move ahead. On Sundays, we had huge workbees so others could participate in the project. The friendships that developed from working together to achieve a common goal proved more valuable than the goal itself.

Funding wasn't a big problem because the conference gave us a \$5,000 grant, church members donated about \$8,000, and a non-Adventist gave \$10,000 to the project.

The Sunday before school began, we had a pancake breakfast workbee to clean up and prepare for the opening of school. The spirit of optimism and cooperation was at an all-time high.

Two or three of us continued to work most Sundays through December to develop a functional computer lab from old donated equipment. We installed air-conditioners in the classrooms after the Home and School held a first-ever Fall Harvest Festival fund-raiser. Using the donations and grants, we were able to purchase nine new computers, assorted software, network cards, two network hubs, and a router that allowed us to establish an ASDL link to the Internet six months after we started the project. Although everything seemed to progress much slower than I wanted, I discovered that God has His way of working things out for the best good of all concerned.

We opened school with double the previous year's enrollment and paid off all debts by the end of the 1999-2000 school year. Although

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with the actual hardware setup, so it became my responsibility.

Not only did I have to teach the upper grades, administer the school, do janitorial and maintenance work, water the fields, and rebuild the school's finances, but I had also undertaken the task of creating a functional computer lab—for which I had received no formal training. Fortunately, I had a full-time teacher's aide who was basically teaching the 11 students in grades 1 to 4. I would not have been able to complete the lab during my first year at the school if I had had to teach grades 1 to 8.

In the long run, it was lucky that I understood the hardware and software issues because now I can teach kids how to fit into the new economy in ways I previously only vaguely understood. I can now better describe for them job opportunities in the information technology industry and the kinds of training they will need for such careers. For example: Although most families have computers and nearly all companies use electronic networks, there are few technicians, network administrators,

things were looking good, it fell to me to finish the project. No one knew how to build a computer system from old parts, configure the server, router, hubs, printers, and network or maintain the system once it was up and working—or if they did, we couldn't afford their services. I couldn't do those tasks either, but I learned how on the job—here a little and there a little.

I didn't realize beforehand all that the project entailed because one of my church member helpers had done most of the preliminary planning and building layout. After school started, he became too busy to help

Iva Bueno, a student at Maui Adventist School, and her mother, Veronica Greenwell, help with library remodeling at the school.

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and programmers to fix those systems.

The Transformation Completed: Using the New Computer Lab

During our first year, even though the lab wasn't fully functional until February 2000, my students mastered technology faster than I ever imagined possible. Not only did they produce creative PowerPoint presentations and projects, but they also created the school's first-ever yearbook—in full color! Each student scanned in pictures and created his or her own page. The upper-grade students helped the younger ones.

Students in grades 5 to 8 had daily E-mail assignments for science, social studies, reading, and language arts. They became electronic pen pals with other Adventist schools and sent audio and video greetings over the Internet.

Currently, we are in our second year of integrating technology into the curriculum. The upper-grade students are making Web pages for our yearbook sponsors. They are thus earning money for themselves as well as for the school. We have students doing field studies using scientific data-collection protocols for humpback whale observations, then posting their findings on the Internet. This is a collaborative project with students around the world, made possible only because of our computer lab. Now our students are talking about becoming graphics and software engineers, network administrators, and computer technicians—all because of their small-school computer lab experience.

Learning has not only taken on a new look, but it has also become much more practical and engaging. Our students have acquired skills that a short time ago were virtually unattainable for most of them. Their worldview has changed so that they now see themselves as part of a global society rather than isolated in a small school located in a community with limited opportunities. As they participate in Web-based collaborative projects and communicate with other students via the Internet, they no longer see themselves as small-town kids in a small school with no vision for the future. Now their outlook is bright with hope and promise

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Students use the new computer lab at Maui Adventist School.

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because a few dedicated people cared enough to work extra hard to make it possible for those with less to dream big and access opportunity through the window of technology.

Any school can integrate technology into its curriculum and use it to accomplish educational goals if it develops a vision for the future. While the principal and teachers play significant roles in the visioning process,

the school board ultimately determines the character and future of the school through its choice of school personnel. The board must set an example by acting on its decisions and unitedly transforming its vision into reality. Individual board members must carry the board's optimistic enthusiasm back to their churches and help translate talk into action.

The home, the church, and the school must work together to successfully transfer our faith to the next generation. Each of us has a vital role to play in achieving excellence in our schools. Church leaders must recognize that education is not a luxury or a peripheral activity. It is at the very heart of church evangelism, growth, and nurture. Parents must invest of themselves as well as their money to make our schools all that we want them to be. Members of the church at large must become involved in our schools and give enthusiastically of their time, talents, and resources to build and equip the next generation. Collaboration between home, school, and church will provide the power and momentum to accomplish our mission of providing excellence in Adventist education. ✍

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