

Back to School at East Elementary

BY LYMAN HAFEN | IN DIXIE

When I passed through the door of East Elementary School the other day, I stepped a half-century back in time. A warm wave of memory, palpable as water, rolled over me. The perennial, comforting smell of school lunch wafted through me and the lobby and long hallway before me fit as perfectly as a puzzle piece in the picture I remembered.

I looked up expecting to see the eyes of George Washington and Abraham Lincoln staring furtively down at me from their portraits on the high wall. But they were no longer there. How, I wondered, would today's students ever amount to anything without the Father of our Country and Honest Abe watching over them day by day?

Within minutes I would learn there was little reason for concern. Within minutes I would experience first-hand how splendidly the students of East Elementary represent the hope and promise of the future. I'd been invited back to my own elementary school for its annual storytelling festival. It was a request I had accepted reluctantly because standing in front of several hundred high-energy children has never been easy for me, and more often than not has resulted in disaster.

One of the school's excellent teachers, Natalie Miller, had invited me to come. She said I'd have 30 minutes with the kindergarten through second-graders, then we'd do it again with the third- through fifth-graders. I leaned against the



Thousands of students over the past half century have attended East Elementary School in St. George. TODD SEIFERT | SGM

lunchroom wall and braced myself for a hurricane as the children filed in by the dozens. But the storm never hit. They sat silently down on the floor, row by row, and looked up respectfully at their principal, Teria Mortensen, who stood at the head of the room with an expression on her face that communicated her exact expectations. Once they were all seated the principal welcomed them and reminded them about showing respect to the speaker, and they looked up at her with the same brand of awe that I had looked up with at the portraits that once hung in the lobby.

As the principal spoke I remembered my own principal, Mr. Olsen, who had stood in that same spot on that same floor 50 years ago when I was one of the dozens of children sitting on the floor looking up with the kind of trembling respect that makes your stomach weak. I would like to think

we were as attentive and respectful as the students looking up at Mrs. Mortensen, but I really doubt it. I recalled how I looked forward with nearly uncontrollable delight to the assemblies and lyceums and school programs held in that room. I remembered the traveling musicians and magicians and storytellers who had performed for us on that ancient hardwood stage. How they had set our minds free with dreams and aspirations we could have never imagined. I looked at those hundreds of modern-day students spread across the floor, children whose lives are immersed in every manner of digital diversion, and wondered how I would hold them for even one minute.

Then I stepped to the microphone, shaking in my boots. I looked around the room, the same room that had seemed like the largest room on earth when I was in first grade. The room had

become very small now, and it closed in on me even more as the gaze of hundreds of expectant eyes settled heavily upon me. I remembered how the east wall, now built in with cinder block, had once been large windows and glass doors and how the morning sun had blasted into that room with a brilliance that made your eyes ache. I remembered the luau we staged on the courtyard outside those doors on a perfect spring evening when all our parents proudly watched us dance in grass skirts and sing our hearts out.

I started to talk and I told them how even though it had been a half-century since I was one of them, I remembered all seven of my East Elementary teachers as if I had been in their class yesterday. Miss Jolley, Mrs. Schmutz, Mrs. Wilson, Mrs. Miles, Mrs. Phoenix, Mr. Hughes and Mr. Sullivan. I held back tears as I shared something special in my

memory about each of them. And then I told the students a story — the story of how I had made it all the way to third grade without knowing how to read. And I was heartened to see the children sitting there listening, giving me their full attention as I explained how Mrs. Lois Wells, came to my third-grade class one day and called me out in front of my fellow students. I felt shame as I stood up and walked out of the room that day. I knew all my classmates knew that when Mrs. Wells came for you it was because you were a bad reader. At the time, I thought everyone in the world could read but me.

I told them how Mrs. Wells worked her magic on me and how that miracle of transforming symbols on a page into words, and words into sentences and sentences into stories had been

one of saving graces of my life.

In the short time allotted I shared other stories, all of them set in that sacred space of East Elementary. When I asked a question, hands stretched into the air and would-be responders waited patiently to be called on. The answers were thoughtful, insightful and respectfully shared. I stood in awe at how much more these children understand than I did when I sat on that floor. And when it was over and the sound of their enthusiastic applause carried up to the rafters, I looked out across that sea of kids and saw the future George Washingtons and Abe Lincolns and Mrs. Mortensens and Mrs. Millers. I saw the future of our community, our country, our world.

It made me smile harder than I've smiled in a long time.