

# HEART AND SOUL: THE STORY OF THE FOUNDING OF KINGSWAY COLLEGE SCHOOL

BY PETER HELSTON WITH SPECIAL THANKS TO DOUG LANGLEY FOR HIS EXTENSIVE HISTORICAL ARCHIVES



## WRITTEN TO CELEBRATE THE SCHOOL'S 20TH ANNIVERSARY IN 2009

*"We dedicate this school to the Glory of God and to the service of our students, our faculty, our families and the betterment of the human community."*

With these words, Bishop J. C. Fricker dedicated Kingsway College School, October 26, 1989. St George's-on-the-Hill was overflowing with proud parents and 50 students, faculty, staff, local dignitaries and the KCS Board of Governors. Attending were 15 students from Grade One, 10 from Grade Two, 8 from Grade Three, 10 from Grade Four and 7 from the Grade Five -- and they were all on hand to experience history in the making.

From its humble beginning in 1989, KCS has grown to a student population of 308 and staff of 45. Every grade from one to eight is now represented with two classes. Construction of the third major addition is due for completion in the summer of 2009.

What led to the creation of such a successful school? The story began in the mid-80's.

Why an independent school? While there was a significant level of dissatisfaction at that time with the local public school system, there were no independent schools in the west end of Toronto. An opportunity was beckoning.

The founding of an independent school in Canada is a fairly rare occurrence. In fact, only a handful of them have been started over the last 100 years or so. And, of course, you can understand why. The creation of a school involves an enormous amount of work, and the people behind the work face significant financial risk.

Given the fact that independent schools are not-for-profit ventures, it is a wonder why any independent schools exist at all.

This is the story of one of those schools, Kingsway College School, and how it came into existence.

### **IT ALL STARTED...**

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...in a most unusual manner. St. Georges-on-the-Hill Church, an Anglican diocese, had built a huge facility, called the Christian Education Centre (CEC), in the late '50's to accommodate a burgeoning Sunday School along with the ever-expanding programs for Boy Scouts, Girl Guides, Brownies and Beavers. The impressive building came complete with classrooms, gymnasium, full kitchen and a stage for plays and entertainment.

Of course, no sooner had the building been finished than the demographics in the community began to shift. By the mid-'80's, the CEC was seriously under-utilized and in dire need of renovation. I remember Jim Bacon, one of the wardens at St. George's at the time, telling me that re-shingling the roof cost \$50,000 in the early '80's -- money no parish including St. Georges could easily come up with.

So the dilemma of what to do long-term with the Christian Education Centre was a stark one and needed to be addressed.

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## ST. GEORGES PARISH COUNCIL SET TO THE TASK...

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...and an option, and one that nearly came to be, was to tear down the CEC and replace it with either a senior's residence or a nursing home. Extencicare, one of the major players in that business, had submitted a design proposal to build and manage a new building on the site of the CEC. Its proposal was being seriously considered in the fall of 1986 and spring of 1987 by parish council.

But as the father of 3 young children who were fully utilizing the facility through Brownies, Girl Guides and St. Georges Nursery School, this seemed a short-sighted solution. While other parishes at the time focused on building elderly-centred facilities, the need for a youth-oriented parish seemed to present a better long-term solution, at least for St. George's.

Through a serendipitous turn of events, I was on parish council during these discussions and in a position to help defeat this plan. So it came to a vote on whether or not to proceed with building a senior's residence in the last parish council meeting in May 1987. It was narrowly defeated. But the financial problems of the CEC remained.

## NOW WHAT ARE YOU GOING TO DO...

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...to find a solution to the problems with the Christian Education Centre", asked Canon David Luxton? The setting was a house blessing at Jim and Heather Bacon's home, August 16, 1987. Canon Luxton had put it squarely to me and my wife Carol – it is one thing to defeat the motion to go with a seniors-focused residence in place of the CEC. Now, he asked us to find a viable long term solution to fix the financial drain on St. George's. David had always envisioned a school on this site.

We had already become frustrated with the quality of curriculum offered at Humber Valley Village Public School and the public education system in general. How things had changed since I was a student there! No grammar, no phonics, a odd approach to curriculum, driven, it seemed, and turned out to be, by flower children in position of authority!

As a publisher and a parent, I was deeply concerned about this regime's approach to literacy.

So it made sense to combine the 2 issues – help to provide a better education alternative in Central Etobicoke and solve St. George's problems with what to do with the Christian Education Centre.

Investigating the feasibility of an independent school seemed like a good place to start.

## THE FIRST LITTLE STEP...

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...in late October of 1987, was an expedition to Richmond Hill's Holy Trinity School which had begun in a church and evolved into a new facility of its own. Carol and two members of St. George's Long Range Planning Committee, Yme Van Dyke and Bill Dixon, met with Holy Trinity's headmaster, Rev. Jack Rose.

In this meeting and one subsequent with just Carol and I, Jack provided all the basic information and loads of encouragement to forge ahead.

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Canon Luxton, Warden Jim Orr, and Yme Van Dyke and Bill Dixon met at our home in mid-November to chat about the feasibility of moving forward with the concept of a private or independent school occupying the CEC.

## FROM FEASIBILITY TO FOUNDING THE FOUNDER'S COMMITTEE...

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...started to emerge in December of 1987 when Carol and I approached Doug and Shirray Langley, who are friends of ours and also St. George's parishioners. Doug, whose business was in environmental and management consulting, and Shirray, who is a talented artist, shared our concerns about the state of the public education system. (Their son also attended Humber Valley Village Public School). The four of us now shared the vision of filling the CEC with an education alternative – an elementary day school, driven by that imperative energy from our dissatisfaction with the public education system to forge ahead.

We then approached Jim Prichard, Peter Pichler and Brian Kelsall, 3 talented parishioners – Jim as an accountant with strong ties to independent schools, Peter as a banker with ties to future financing and Brian, a corporate lawyer -- to form the Founding Committee. (Canon Luxton was also on the Founding Committee, but unfortunately had to decline most meetings due to a considered conflict of interest).

## HOW MANY CUPS OF COFFEE...

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... do you have to serve to start a school? Thus began a series of meetings so many meetings -- some formal and some informal. All to develop the business plan for a school. There is a tradition within the Anglican Church to foster non-profit independent schools as opposed to profit-based private schools. It was decided early by the Founding Committee to focus on a non-profit community-based school.

On the 9th of February, a seminal meeting of the Founding Committee was held at our home. At the meeting, a number of names for the school were discussed. Doug suggesting Kingsway College School and that was quickly adopted. Later, when we went to register the corporation under the name "Kingsway College School", we ran into trademark problems with Oshawa's Kingsway College, a Seventh Day Adventist private school. Which is why, if you ever wondered, the name of the school became "The Kingsway Etobicoke School Corporation" doing business as "Kingsway College School".

Canon Luxton suggested that we hire Angus Scott, recently retired head of Trinity College School, as a paid consultant to guide us through the journey.

## DOUG ARRANGED TO MEET...

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...with the Ministry of Education to begin the application process to launch a school. Much to our surprise, the application procedure was very simple – fill out a one page form with basic school co-ordinates and you were in business! Only if you were starting a high school did you need to meet curriculum requirements. Doug said it would be more difficult to apply to sell hot dogs in Toronto than open an elementary school!

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## WHAT BEGAN AS A SIMPLE IDEA...

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...quickly became less so. Our initial plans involved a focus on mid-elementary grades of four, five and six, because we thought that parents would be far more interested in our school at this level.

Doug, whose expertise included market research studies, polled 350 families in the area in February 1988. The results clearly showed that curriculum was the most important aspect of a child's education. Nevertheless, addressing individual needs and class size were considered important by over 80% of the respondents. Parents favoured a basic education stressing academic fundamentals. Parents were asked to rate the importance of several academic subjects beyond core curriculum and they reported that literature, science, history, and geography should complement the core curriculum of reading, writing and arithmetic. Computer science and French were important to over 60% of respondents. In sports, track and field was the most popular choice.

Further study suggested there was very strong support for an education alternative to the public education system in central Etobicoke. It seemed that the established independent schools, either in downtown Toronto or Oakville, left a huge geographic area unserved. Parents of children attending those schools spent an inordinate amount of time driving back and forth. Not to mention the social ramifications of children living so far from their chosen schools. And, very important to some parents, all references to any spiritual or religious connotations had been totally removed from the public system in the mid-80's. Having a school that stood for spiritual values seemed to be an important issue. The demand was certainly there.

At this point, we started meetings with prospective parents to gauge tangible support – would they actually have the courage to send their children to a start-up school? We felt “yes”.

### ***How to pick a school uniform...***

*...was a task that Carol took to heart. We needed to demonstrate to prospective parents at our meetings that we were making tangible progress, not just talk. Carol met with Halperns that March, picking out some potential plaids all based in her favorite colour of blue. Armed with swaths of cloth, Carol then drove around to all the Catholic and any alternative schools in Central Etobicoke just to double-check that none of the plaids under consideration were already being used by other schools in the area. Dress Mackenzie plaid was the eventual winner and has stood the test of time over the first 20 years of KCS as an attractive and versatile design.*

## DOUG'S RESEARCH GUIDED US...

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...as we sought to perfect all the practical issues like curriculum choices, academic fundamentals, class size, athletics and values. Most surprising was the overwhelming demand for the school to start at the lower- and mid-grades – which is what we eventually did. Doug's initial market research and subsequent poll done in the spring of 1989 were critical to the eventual success of the plan – impressing even the Bank of Nova Scotia who set up the initial line of credit. Wayne MacDonald, VP Toronto West for BNS became a big fan of KCS, even attending closing ceremonies for the first few years – very un-banker like!!

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## SO BACK TO THE ST. GEORGE'S CORPORATION...

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...in June 1988 for a meeting at Jim Orr's home with Jim Pritchard's financial plan, Doug's market research and our proposal to start the school. We had expected that St. George's on-the-Hill would offer its financial facilities to help underwrite the start-up. Unfortunately, after much discussion, it was decided that St. George's could not help with any financial commitment, with the exception of making room available in the CEC at a reduced rent of \$6-7000 per year.

## IT USUALLY ALL COMES DOWN TO MONEY...

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...and since the Langley and Helston families could not afford to start the school on our own, the concept lay fallow all through the summer and fall of 1988. There was no magic wand in raising the \$130,000 which Jim Prichard's budget had determined was necessary to fund the start-up. And, as with most things in young parent's lives -- children, summer and a thriving business -- filled in the time very nicely and the concept for KCS was almost dead.

## CAROL AND I WERE SITTING...

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...in our living room in early October when the phone rang. It was Christine Horodnyk, one of the strongest supporters of the whole concept. Her point was direct and compelling -- "whatever needs to be done, she and other committed parents will work to make it happen". It is possible that without that phone call, the KCS dream might never have been realized. Who wanted to commit themselves to raising what seemed like an huge sum of start-up money, and then work outside of your business that pays the bills to start something that had only a downside financial risk?

## IT CAME DOWN TO A MEETING ON SUNDAY, OCTOBER 16...

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...in the Langley's backyard. I can remember it was a beautiful fall day and maybe Doug's usual good selection of wine had something to do with it. But we poured over all our notes, Doug methodically going over minutes of meetings and his research to find the one thing that would be a "sure bet" indicator if we decided to "go". Of course, nothing is that simple. But the central feeling, shared by both of us, was "what a waste of time the whole exercise would have been if it ended here". So, divining there was nothing more we could learn from the work so far, we were silent for a few minutes. Finally, I looked at Doug, both of us with no illusions about the hard task at hand, and said, "Let's just do it.". It was a thrilling moment...and a little scary for both of us!

### ***Shirray's task was to design...***

*...the KCS logo as well as the school stationery and media material. She didn't disappoint. Combining a traditional chevron surrounding a cross with a simple font for KCS, the final effect still reflects just the right balance for an independent school associated with the Anglican Church.*

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## WHERE DID THEY ALL GO (?)...

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...was expressed quite often from this point on. We needed to raise \$130,000 to underwrite the first year of the school. And we needed to set this up at the Bank of Nova Scotia before we could hire staff or incur other large expenditures. Letters from Doug and I went out November 23 to every parent that had shown any interest in sending their children to KCS. A pivotal meeting was called at St. George's the following Wednesday, November 30 for parents and others to raise the necessary capital.

## SOMETHING HAD TO HAPPEN... AND QUICK...

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...if we were going to open our doors in September '89. Needless to say, hopes of a large turnout were dashed. The meetings that followed became ever more sparsely attended – hoping for 50 or 60 people, we'd get 18; when we hoped for 18, we got 11.

## SO WE BECAME CREATIVE...

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...and offered half pledges, phone calls and visits. We turned over every stone we could find. In addition to the commitments made by our family and the Langley's, other families such as Chayko, Tozer, Tomulka, Horodnyk, Davis followed (Ulrike Davis, a public school teacher and St. George's parishioner joined the Founding Committee at this time).

More commitments were forthcoming from the Mason, Renison and Gallo families. Dan Gallo, a long-time friend from the days of my childhood, offered a commitment even though he never sent his children to KCS. Jim Orr made a commitment for a full pledge, even though his children would not be attending KCS.

## FAST FORWARD TO MID-FEBRUARY 1989...

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...and a critical meeting in St. Hilda's room at St. George's. Three months after the fundraising efforts began, we were still falling short. That meeting was significant. In the meeting, Doug made a strong case for the success of KCS with his research backing his recommendation; I made the point about what a waste to get this far for it not to happen; Carol got to the point – without another commitment from someone in that room, we would have to shut down the concept.

## TIME STOOD STILL FOR A FEW MINUTES...

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...and I can remember starting to close my over-stuffed KCS binder thinking, "Well that's it". Then Angus Scott stepped forward with his commitment. We now had just enough in pledges to go to the bank. Had Angus not spoken up at that exact moment, the 1989 school year would have been lost. And the entire concept of KCS may have disappeared with it. And Angus also went from being a paid consultant to being a volunteer to help create the success of Kingsway College School. Doug then made a motion to create the school, the vote was unanimous.

Kingsway College School was officially born.

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## MEANWHILE, BACK AT ST. GEORGE'S ANNUAL VESTRY MEETING...

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...in late February, we faced another hurdle. A group of parishioners voiced strong objections to the proposal on philosophical grounds. They felt strongly that having an independent school of any sort was both elitist and under-mined the public school system. It somewhat surprised us given that KCS was the solution to the financial drag on St. George's of the Christian Education Centre. It was an interesting meeting, and one were a vote had to be held to allow the school to proceed.

## IT MIGHT HAVE BEEN CLOSE...

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... except for Canon Luxton. David knew the huge amount of work that had gone into the KCS concept to that point, essentially on behalf of St. George's. He made a methodical, but impassioned case for an independent school occupying the Christian Education Centre. To paraphrase, "It isn't just finances, it is the opportunity to share Christian values with an elementary school population".

After David sat down, the vote was never in doubt.

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### ***If you can call it an "office"...***

*...then KCS opened for business in mid-March, 1989, in an empty classroom right across from the church offices in the CEC. Our assets in the "office" included a phone answering machine that Christine Horodnyk provided, a small kindergarten desk to put it on, and a little kindergarten chair. To be fair, I think we borrowed the desk and chair from St. George's Nursery School! Christine and Shirray ran the school office and put up with the heat that spring and summer. They responded to dozens of phone calls that were now, thankfully, coming in, answering questions, arranging parent information evenings and setting up interviews for potential students when we picked a headmaster.*

## APPLICATIONS WERE ACCEPTED...

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...in early 1989 along with a \$50 fee to hold a spot for students. The records still exist of those initial applications. Some of those first applicants included names such as Molson, Gesualdi, Cameron and more, who would play a part, and in some cases continue to play a

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part, in the KCS success story. Ten out of the 50 students in the first year were children of founders or the board.

## SO, NOW WE HAD...

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...the funding guaranty, a dedicated Board of Governors, incorporation was underway, bylaws, an “office”, logos and stationery, the uniform, deposits for 26 committed Year 1 students (with an objective of 50), a 5 year agreement with St. Georges, and a vision of what kind of school and curriculum we wanted. Now it was time to hire some staff!

## ONLY ONE ADVERTISEMENT...

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...looking for a headmaster was needed in March in the Globe & Mail, the interest was that great. Angus, our “head” hunter, agreed to vet the applicants. The search committee was made up of Angus, Doug, Ulrike and myself. Over 50 applications were received from Victoria, B.C. to Bermuda, some from existing heads of other independent schools. Angus recommended a short list of 5 of the strongest candidates. A talented lot, each would have been a good choice. But in the end, and after much debate by the committee, Hal Hannaford emerged as the successful candidate for his leadership skills and his demonstrated fund-raising abilities at Crescent School.

Hal was offered the job in April and officially started July 1, only 2 months before the KCS opening in September. Hal turned out to be a good choice, forging solid relationships with students and parents alike. And who can forget the Galas in the first few years, where he conducted the live auctions!? He and others, especially those in the fledgling Parent Network formed by Christine Horodnyk, gave a solid personality to KCS that secured its reputation in the west end of Toronto.

## A FEW SMALL, BUT IMPORTANT CHANGES...

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...to the way KCS was formulated came from following the experiences of other independent schools. Some had ended up with board members that stayed on the board long after their children had left the school. Others with remote boards did not always communicate with parents very well. To alleviate challenges like this, the KCS bylaws stress that the KCS board reports to the members (parents), which is why there is an annual general meeting when the board reports up to the members. Term limits were also introduced to avoid creating a stale body that was out of touch.

On July 24, we met at Doug’s home and approved a board composition of up to 10 members. The initial KCS board consisted of: me, Doug, Angus, Canon Luxton, Christine Horodnyk, Don Cameron, Cindy Koelsch and Robin Hemmingsen with the current headmaster as ex-officio.

Each of the board would dedicate countless hours of volunteer time. Each believed passionately in KCS.



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## ***No sacred cows: I asked Robin Hemmingsen...***

*...our finance chair, to take on the task of finding tax advantages for KCS parents -- an issue that was largely overlooked by many other independent school we had contact with. Robin did a great job, looking at this issue from a variety of points. She reported back to the board options in 2 areas: religious instruction (not offered by the public system) and crediting the lunch hour as "daycare". Both created tax deductions for our parents.*

## **AND ON IT WENT...**

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...through the remainder of the summer, sometimes rough around the edges, but with a spirit that still lurks in the KCS halls to this day. Hal's first academic hire was Barbara Piccini, a fantastic choice to put together a solid and challenging curriculum that played to the ideals and values envisioned by the founders.

Offers were made to our teachers Linda Carr, Ralph Fen and Ulrike Davis. Shirray continued on in the administrative and registrars role. All worked tirelessly in the weeks leading up to school opening.

Our Letters Patent was issued on June 1, 1989, helping to transform the dream into a reality. KCS opened that September with the requisite 50 students, a bit of a miracle considering the tight timeline.

## ***Hal had a plan...***

*.....for the opening assembly to show KCS students this was not like the schools they had attended in the past. As he addressed those 50 students in Canada Hall, two boys (it was always the boys!) started fidgeting and acting up a bit in the front row. Hal asked them to stand up and both to stay after the assembly as he needed to have a "talk" with them. You could have heard a pin drop after that. Authority and respect were laid down by Hal at that moment. KCS was off to a flying start!*

## **AND NOW, IT WAS THE TIME...**

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...for many other dedicated people to carry forward the reputation of KCS. The Founder's didn't stick around for a long time as sustaining KCS was different from starting it. I stepped down as Chair at the September 1991 AGM and Doug assumed the Chair. Many talented teachers, staff, board members and Parent Network people have stepped up over the years to make, what is today, a great school.

## **ONE LAST BIT OF BUSINESS...**

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...happened on a weekend in mid-April, 1991. To capture the original values that had driven us to start KCS, some of the board members and founders met at Camp Kilcoo for a weekend to draft a Vision Statement. Everyone had been asked to prepare their best ideas. The discussion was lively. Finding consensus was a lot more challenging than any of us imagined going into that weekend.

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Doug and I felt strongly that a reference to “Christian values” was a critical statement to include...and a definitive and marketable difference between KCS and other schools, especially those in the public sector. It was Sunday afternoon, and our time was running out before heading back, and opinions were still flowing on this one phrase. Then Robin Hemmingsen, who is Jewish, stood up and basically said “that the value system that Christ stood for -- peace, love and tolerance -- is universal, this should guide KCS”. That ended the discussion and the final vision with “Christian values” in it was adopted unanimously.

And these values remain part of Kingsway College School's heart and soul to this day.