



## Remembering Gratefully: Reflections on Our First 25 Years

A half a dozen interested parents showed up at Peachtree Restaurant & Pie House in Hazel Dell in the fall of 1997. John Bronson, pastor of the former Hazel Dell Evangelical Free Church on N.W. 9th Avenue, and some congregation members and their friends had been researching options for Christian education. They were praying and seeking an education for their children that was unlike any of the local options, something featuring a thoroughly Christian, academically rigorous liberal arts and sciences curriculum. Many of them had read Douglas Wilson's 1991 book *Recovering the Lost Tools of Learning*, a description of a ten-year-old school's efforts in Idaho to merge a comprehensively Christian worldview with the back-to-the-Medieval-Trivium approach that Dorothy Sayers outlined in a 1947 essay.

### Small Beginnings

The group was small, but inspired by their shared reading, the excitement level was high and everyone involved became active in spreading the word. A

board was soon formed from the group. In spite of frequent planning meetings, it became increasingly apparent how much it would take to get this mammoth undertaking off the ground.

Of all the possibilities considered, the name "Cedar Tree, A Christian Classical School" was eventually chosen because of the promised blessings expressed in Psalm 92:12-15. Later, in 2008, the word order



*Jane Jones teaches kindergarten students in 2006 with the aid of a stuffed animal.*

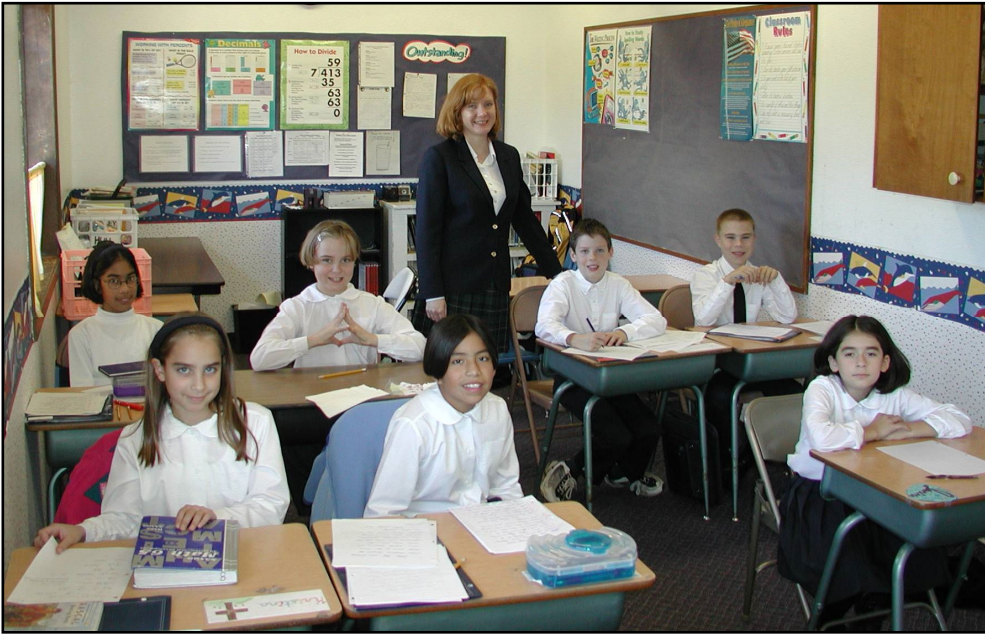


*Diana Meadowcroft with her 3rd Grade class in 2002. Seven would eventually form Cedar Tree's first full graduating class in 2012.*

would be swapped to the more customary "Classical Christian" arrangement. Pastor Bronson's wife Nini created the school's first logo, and a flyer was produced to attract families for the target date of fall 1999.

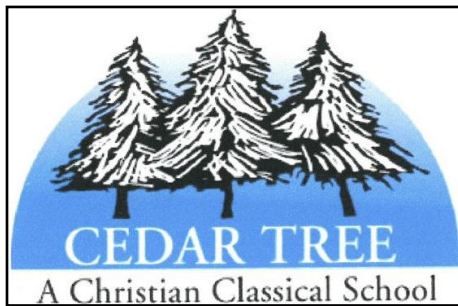
Early discussions produced agreement that the new endeavor should seek to be a private school, but to get underway as soon as possible they became convinced they would need to start out first as a home school cooperative, and then pursue state registration within a few years. Because their thoughts were more aimed at attracting as many families possible in order to get underway, rather than building for a lasting future, they charged a low tuition rate of just \$15 a month per student that first year!

A myriad of other decisions had to be made that would set the course of the fledgling school in motion. Official



*Pamela Hull with her class of cheerful 5th Grade students in 2001. Some may notice a family resemblance between Pamela and her sister, PattyLynn Gossman.*

bylaws, policies, and incorporation papers had to be drawn up. Curriculum had to be selected. New practices and routines needed to be established. Numerous training seminars were attended. In those early years the staff relied heavily on materials and



*Cedar Tree's first logo was designed by Nini Bronson.*

advice from Logos School in Moscow, Idaho, which had been operating since 1981. Cedar Tree folks were frequently in contact with other schools of the rapidly growing nationwide classical Christian school movement in order to gain valuable insights from their experience. At the same time, recent transplants from England Michael and Juliet Kane were part of a startup group for a sister school then forming in Beaverton, Oregon, and both groups benefited immensely from meeting and praying together regularly.

Pastor Bronson was called to serve another congregation in California in the summer of 1999, just as efforts were well along to open school in the fall. Before his departure, he helped secure a facility lease with Hazel Dell Evangelical Free Church, which proved to be a critical stabilizing arrangement in those early years. The house the Bronsons moved out of, just a block from the church, was purchased by Steve and Kathy Chapman. Before long Kathy

became a Latin teacher at the fledgling school.

Diana Meadowcroft, a young mother who had been in the middle of the early planning efforts, was named the school's first administrator, serving in that capacity for the first two years. With a master's degree in educational ministry, she brought a passion for the classical Christian model of education. Her husband Bill, a Western Seminary graduate and certified public accountant, was tagged to serve as the school's treasurer, a role which he has filled admirably for the entire quarter century of the school's existence. Karin Bruechert joined the team that summer and volunteered her organizational

skills full-time to assist with office support, working tirelessly in those early years.

### **The School Opens**

The new school opened its doors on September 13, 1999, with 29 students. Most families contributed in the work, many as teachers, thanks to the childcare program overseen by Larissa VanderPloeg. An important lesson learned in those early years was the irreplaceable value of parents dedicated to raising children in a manner consistent with the school's all-of-life objectives. The complications and unreliability of the home school cooperative model began to take its toll, but there was still enthusiasm and appreciation for the work being done to provide this unique kind of education for their children.



*Headmaster Tad Spading chatting in the office with long-time administrative assistant Karin Bruechert.*

As the enrollment approached 50 students in 2001, the board hired a headmaster named Tad Spading, a friendly and creative man who composed Bible and history songs for the students, many of which are still used in classes to this day. Mr. Spading served in that capacity for nearly three years.

The school community was encouraged as new students continued to come, but the growth also brought challenges that strained their limited facility arrangements. To work around the small Sunday school rooms, significant remodeling was done, while at the same time seeking additional or different facilities to rent. An arrangement was made with another church a couple blocks away to host some of the grade levels.

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The school's fifth year brought a difficult parting of the ways, as several families and even some teachers and a former administrator left the school to start a different school, largely over leadership

differences. Beacon Academy served families in the area for several years before having to discontinue in 2012. The Cedar of Lebanon (the specific tree referenced in Psalm 92) next to the driveway as you enter our campus was a kind gift to our school at their closing.

At this critical time of disappointment and strained relationships, the Lord brought Jim Ellifritt to serve as headmaster for the next two years. Mr. Ellifritt was a lieutenant colonel in the U. S. Army, overseeing artillery during wars in Kuwait and Afghanistan. A godly and disciplined man with Christian day care experience, Mr. Ellifritt helped immensely with kindness and firmness to bring peace and encouragement within the school community.



*Lt. Col. Jim Ellifritt (headmaster 2004-06) poses with Abigail (Ridgeway) Buckley (class of 2013) during a 2009 return visit to speak on Veterans Day.*

A new challenge arose with the looming expiration of the school's initial seven-year lease, and indication that the church would not be able to renew it. The search began for a new home, and over forty

## Our Church Hosts in the Early Years



**Top row:** (1) The school first met at Hazel Dell Evangelical Free Church, 1999-2006; (2) Nearby City Harvest Church hosted some grade levels 2003-2004; (3) Vancouver Wesleyan Church was the location for older students, 2006-2007.

**Bottom row:** (4) Northside Baptist Church on 63rd Street was home for some students 2006-08; (5) Grace Baptist Church hosted some in the fall of 2007; (6) Other classes were held at Cascades Presbyterian Church, spring 2008.

## Building our own campus



**From top:** (1) The first board meeting on the new property in October 2008. The house became the office building, and this family room became the reception area. (2) A view of the parking lot during the whirlwind of construction activity in the summer of 2008. (3) A Groundbreaking Ceremony was held on June 22, 2008. Pictured are Don Foster of TEAM Construction, Facility Chairman David Morgan, Headmaster Tom Bradshaw, and students Sophia Ryder (class of 2018) and Micah Meadowcroft (class of 2012). (4) Rob Barnes and Tim Rice install siding on an additional classroom building (now Bldg 500) in 2009.

area churches were contacted about the possibility of a rental arrangement. During the next two years, the school's size and the limited options forced them to split between different churches.

Mr. Ellifritt's surprise callup to Afghanistan in the fall of 2006 left the 7-year-old school in search of its fourth leader, and Tom Bradshaw was hired that November.

During this time the school's enrollment topped 100 students, but it was marked by much mobility. Because no single church was available to accommodate the growing student body, teachers who taught multiple grade levels became accustomed to working out of their vehicle trunks. Fridays after school were spent tearing down classrooms so that the church could use their rooms on Sunday, and Monday mornings became setup time, week after week after week.

One church became unavailable just two weeks before the start of the 2007-08 school year, leading to a last-minute scramble. As it turned out, three different churches were used over the course of that 2007-08 school year as the school community eagerly awaited the day when they would all be together on one new campus.

Much labor during these pivotal years fell to the Facility Committee, chaired by Shawn Moore, a Cedar Tree dad and civil engineer. Board members spent countless hours searching and sifting through the available alternatives.

### The New Property

After considering numerous possibilities, the board eventually decided to buy and build on a 15-acre parcel of land near the Clark County Fairgrounds. Cedar Tree dad Bud McRae led the school's initial efforts at a capital campaign to raise funds to purchase and develop the property, a total project cost of \$2,100,000. Over \$600,000 was raised by the campaign, and



*Reading buddies sixth grader John Hansberry (Class of 2017) assists kindergartner Karl Miller (Class of 2023).*

families friendly to the school loaned the remainder at a nominal interest rate. Many of these donors were so excited about Cedar Tree’s ministry that they generously donated the interest and even the loan amounts back to the school, leading it to be paid off more quickly than anyone had imagined.

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The zoning application process for a conditional use permit with the County took a year and a half to complete. The sale of the property would become

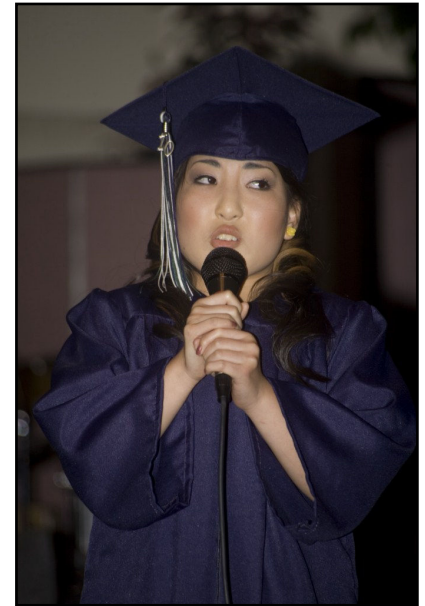


*A “future home” sign was erected on the new property in 2007. Left to right: Ken Gossman, Gary Ike, students Andrew Morgan, Peter Chapman, Max Gossman (all class of 2015), Claire Morgan (class of 2019), Rebekah Morgan (class of 2022), Steve Ryder, and Steve Chapman.*

final with that permit, but the work was only just beginning.

With the property purchase finalized, the school began its longstanding tradition of monthly “Ora et Labora” (Prayer and Work) days to gather for prayer and working on the new property, even when there were only rundown barns, blackberry vine-covered sheds, barbed wire fences, and nothing resembling a school.

After a groundbreaking ceremony on June 22, 2008, work began in earnest. The Facility Committee, now chaired by David Morgan, worked with contractors TEAM Construction and Wubben Brothers to transform old farmland into a finished school facility in just two and a half months. The parking lot, driveway, plumbing, electrical, septic system, and installation of four



*Molly Aylor, daughter of long-time aide and science teacher Jackie Aylor, was Cedar Tree’s first graduate, in 2010.*

modular buildings (three new and one remodeled) were all underway at the same time. Our flag pole came from the cut-off topmost part of an IKEA flag pole that a car had damaged.

The rush to have everything ready for the start of school was such that classroom furniture had to be moved into classrooms even before the trenches had been backfilled. Against all odds, the whirlwind project was completed and the occupancy permit issued in the nick of time, at 3:30 p.m. on the Friday before school was scheduled to open. While walking through the property for final occupancy approval,



*Two of the original buildings were moved to make room, and construction of the new Assembly Hall was started in 2020 and completed in early 2021. The project was overseen by Rob Brabec, Patrick Hall and David Morgan.*

the inspector inquired if the Latin “peuri” and “puellae” on the bathroom doors was French.

The campus’ first morning hymn was sung on September 8, 2008, around a courtyard of bare dirt surrounded by grateful students and parents. Even before landscaping and classrooms were fully furnished, teachers promised each other that they would always be thankful for having dedicated classrooms that did not have to be torn down and rebuilt every week.

### **Building the Community**

The school’s first full class had reached high school by now, and it was during this time that the school began adding various co-curricular activities for its growing Upper School student body, carefully selecting those which would promote the unique objectives of classical Christian education while being sustainable for the long term.

Drama productions have been an annual tradition, along with occasional madrigal feasts. Mrs. “Mac” McIntosh led our Performance Choir in its early years. The first yearbook was produced as a student project, and has continued that way ever since. Cedar Tree began participating against area public schools in Poetry Out Loud, a recitation competition in which numerous Cedar Tree students were

victorious at the district level over the years. Over the ensuing decade, two students—Micah Meadowcroft and Isaac Lu—even went on past the state contest to compete at nationals in Washington D.C. The Mock Trial team didn’t start until 2018, but quickly became a force to be reckoned with in Southwest Washington competitions, culminating in capturing the district title in 2023.

On the athletic front, coach Robert Loudenback was the driving force behind the school’s cross country teams for high school boys, high school girls, and middle school. Cedar Tree teams have perennially finished strong in districts ever since, with the high school boys even capturing the District IV title in 2021. In later years, opportunities for archery and high school basketball were added.

The school’s first high school Mexico Service trip took place over spring break 2011, spearheaded for many years by Cedar Tree father Keith Cupp.

Students who participated have always returned enriched by the experience of serving in another culture. Another important tradition is that every graduating class has travelled to enjoy a week in Washington D.C., with students taking turns to present at all key sites.

The school first went through the process of accreditation by the Association of Classical Christian



*Valedictorian Steven Traphagen (Class of 2021) addresses the first class to celebrate commencement in the new assembly hall on campus.*

Schools (ACCS) in 2012, further reinforcing the work with the approval of qualified outsiders. Subsequent accreditation renewals have confirmed the educational excellence.

As Cedar Tree students in every grade level receive art and music training, it comes as no surprise that many have shined in those areas. Megan Sheets (class of 2018) received a congressional award for a painting she had created for our annual high school art competition.



*Cedar Tree's class of 2023 celebrates after commencement on campus with the annual tossing of their mortarboards.*

### A Place to Gather

Seeing the need for a large enough space for the growing school to use for events, another capital campaign was launched in 2017, coordinated by Jorja Blake. The chief project of this \$2.1 million campaign was the construction of a new Assembly Hall. Through the generosity of countless friends of the school and a \$250,000 gift from the Murdock Charitable

Trust, the building opened in 2021, proving to be a valuable space for school events and fellowship gatherings. It was during this campaign that the school was fortunately able to purchase the 2.5-acre property to the south and furnish a new science lab to enhance that aspect of the school's educational goals.

In 2020 the covid pandemic brought some unique challenges and a renewed appreciation that our ambitious heart-shaping goals are most effectively achieved through a full-program, in-person education. In order to accommodate the required spacing, it took the use of a nearby church, our large storage room next door, and three Grammar School classes each meeting in two separate rooms. Once the Assembly Hall was finished, it was put to classroom use as well. Only great patience and effort on the part of parents and staff enabled the students to get a full school year of in-person education, a rarity in the state.



*Students helping at an Ora et Labora workday in 2021.*

### Long-term Dedication

*Much of the school's stability can be directly attributed to the teachers, staff, and board members who have provided lasting continuity. These people have served at least 15 of the school's 25 years:*

#### Teachers & Staff:

Dee Dee Brabec  
Tom Bradshaw  
Karin Bruechert  
Sue Carlson  
Kathy Chapman  
Janette Cupp  
Patty Lynn Gossman  
Kathy Hansberry  
Jane Jones  
Diana Meadowcroft  
Susan Morgan  
Mary Stuart  
Ursela Trantham  
Larissa VanderPloeg

#### Board members:

Bob Bruechert  
Bill Meadowcroft  
David Morgan  
Jim VanderPloeg

## Remembering Gratefully

We have much to be grateful for as we look back at the school's first 25 years. To all appearances, a stable school with a clear mission, a beautiful campus, and sound finances is greatly encouraging. Nevertheless, human endeavors are always fragile works that depend on the Lord for their true strength.

Even as the school is on the cusp of a hundred graduates solidly prepared to make a lasting impact, it remains to be seen whether a biblically faithful classical Christian school in Clark County will ever be large by modern standards. Its influence, however, can still prove to be far reaching as

families graciously work together toward the goal of training followers of Jesus Christ, something truly unique in the modern world of education.

We are so grateful for the countless students, parents, teachers, staff, board members, grandparents, donors and prayer partners past and present who have together made the school what it is today. May the next quarter century of Cedar Tree's ongoing work contribute to answering our prayers and blessing our collective labors to nurture students in Christ-centered wisdom to grow strong like cedar trees, flourishing into old age and declaring God's greatness and goodness. To Him be the glory. ✠

