

## **The Shopping Mall Address**

*Remarks Delivered at the Farewell to Cole Park Concert*

*Friday, May 30, 2008*

I go to school in a shopping mall.

That simple statement has gotten me through a lot of awkward silences over the years.

First comes the disbelief. Psh, yeah...right. You wish.

Then come the questions. Wait, so do you guys like to go shopping during lunch?

Do you get to use the escalator for P.E.?

For most people, the idea of going to school in a mall is pretty cool. They imagine that we check out Abercrombie and Fitch between classes, or use Barnes and Noble as a library, or catch a movie after school. I actually had one person ask me if we get out early for big shopping days.

And while it is fun to think about Woods being in Southpoint, we definitely aren't.

We're in Cole Park Plaza.

We have Ciao Bella instead of Maggiano's, Popes instead of Sears, the Dollar Store instead of the Apple Store, and about the closest thing we have to Victoria's Secret is the unmentionables section in the PTA Thrift Shop. We don't have fountains with splashing children—but we do have class changes when the toilet's overflowing again. We don't have live music or street performers (except tonight)—but we do have the sweet sounds of barking dogs and the people walking through Cole Park staring at us.

When they first hear it, most people think having a school in a mall would be interesting, exciting, unique. And they're partly right. We definitely have the best lunch choices of any school in town, and being able to run across to DG is a big plus. Not every school has a coffee stand conveniently located in the parking lot, and I've never heard of another school that can claim such an important role in keeping its neighbors in business. But then there are the other things.

The bathroom situation. The paper thin walls. The lights you can't turn off without disturbing the class next-door. The oddly shaped classrooms. The list goes on and on...kinda like this concert.

For good and for bad, these are the things that make going to school in a shopping mall unforgettable, unpredictable, and endlessly exciting.

In my State of the School Address, I talked about how Woods is more than Cole Park Plaza, how the spirit of Woods can live on even as we make the transition to the new building. I said Woods

is not a place, but a state of mind. And while I still believe that, there is no denying that our time in this dinky little shopping mall has shaped and sharpened the Woods community.

For a decade, Woods has called Cole Park home, and during that time the loving education chaos that is daily life in this school has produced countless memories. Like the time in the Great Ice Storm of 2002 that our own Ann Kaiyala sought shelter from her dark, cold house in the bright, warm comfort of Cole Park. Or the time that we rented some space from the vet, only to discover that a corner of our classroom was still being used to store dead pets. Or even the time, during my first year at Woods, that someone made the huge mistake of letting yours truly watch the front office for a few minuets.

About 10 minuets on the job, I discovered that the toilet had overflowed again and flooded the entire back hallway from the Spanish room to the teacher's lounge. And as I stood there, just staring at the newest lake in Chatham County, something happened. Something clicked. I felt a hand on my shoulder, and when I turned around, I saw a man standing beside me, chuckling to himself. He wisely suggested that I turn the water off, and seeing as water was still gushing out of the toilet like a bidet in overdrive, I did. Then he asked me if I wanted some help cleaning up the mess, and I accepted, although I wondered who this guy was that he would take the time to help clean up an overflowed toilet. So we grabbed mops and buckets, and as we worked, we talked and laughed about all the crazy things that happen every day at Woods. Once we were done, he just shook my hand, and went on his way.

That man's name was Dan Munn, and it was only later that I discovered that Mr. Munn was one of the founding parents of Woods, a one time chairman of the school board, and a plumbing contractor in a previous life. But what Mr. Munn did is only one example of all the countless things that teachers and parents and students have done for Woods over the years.

Many of the walls you see inside this building were built by people sitting in the audience today, and if it is true that Cole Park has left its mark on this school, then it is more than fair to say that this school has left its mark on Cole Park.

It is that intersection between the people and place that makes this concert, this school, this community, so wonderful. So as we prepare to say goodbye to Cole Park, I'm more aware than ever what this aging strip mall has done for this school. Cole Park provided Woods with its first home, and with that, all the challenges of running a school in a space never designed for it, but also all the unforeseen benefits of putting a school between a dentist's office and a pizza place.

With all of its quirks and shabby charm, Cole Park has provided the people of Woods with memories that are truly one of a kind, and ones that will last a lifetime. But more than anything else, Cole Park has provided Woods with the opportunity to be the school it was created to be.

My dear friend Evan Munn once described the purpose of Woods as "academic excellence—whatever it takes" and I could not agree more.

Woods has been a success because the community has come together and made a conscious decision to do whatever it takes to provide the best education possible—even if it means putting

up with all the challenges of a school in a strip mall. And in the end, I think that is the lasting legacy of the building you see around you. It did not begin the school, but it has shaped it. The seeds of the Woods community did not begin because of this place, but they have taken root here, and grown stronger for the tough and dirty soil of life in Cole Park.

So goodbye old friend. We'll miss you next year—or at least Ciao Bella and DG.

Thanks for all the memories—we'll hold them close to our hearts.

And thanks for the lessons you've taught us all—they've made us stronger and wiser. You've taught us to make do with what we have, to make the best of an inadequate situation. We've learned to deal with the bathrooms—you wait in line, and make a friend in the process. We've learned to deal with paper thin walls—you learn to block out Ms. Gerber, or you learn to listen to two lectures at once.

Cole Park has taught us what that great philosopher Jagger once said: "You can't always get what you want, but if you try sometime, well you might just find, you get what you need."

May you stand here as a reminder of where we have come from and where we can go, if we only remember what really matters.

And don't worry, we won't forget you. I plan on talking about you a lot next year when I'm at Carolina. Because whenever there's an awkward silence, I'll just say what I always say.

Did I tell you that I went to school in a shopping mall?

*These remarks are dedicated to the founding families of Woods Charter School.*

*Their hard work, ingenuity, commitment to community, and their never ending pursuit of education remind, inspire, and drive us. Their hands and hearts have built this school, and we are standing on their shoulders.*

*A special thanks to Cotton Bryan, Becca Solomon, and Carolyn Stotts for their time, their talents, and their tears. They have made Cole Park my second home.*

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