

## **INSIGNIFICANT MOMENTS**

*By Joseph Labatt*

Apparently insignificant and tiny moments in human life can often have enduring effects. I believe that nowhere is that more true than at my school, San Antonio Academy.

Quite a few years ago, when I was a second grader at The Academy, I was taking my plate up in the lunchroom. I wasn't paying perfect attention to those around me, and neither was the eighth grader who walked into me. I fell down hard and dropped my plate, which thankfully did not break, but the combined pain and embarrassment of falling down brought me to tears. (Hey, I was in second grade!) I was also afraid the eighth grader would be angry, because he dropped his plate as well, but he immediately allayed my fears by ignoring the plates and spilled food on the ground and coming to see if I was all right. His concern and kind words immediately made me feel much better, and I stopped crying fairly quickly. In fact, I remember that he was so concerned with my welfare that he even offered to carry me to the nurse. I declined, got up, accepted my plate from another helpful older student, and walked on with all the dignity I was capable of having, given that I was only eight years old.

Sure, a small moment of maybe thirty seconds out of years spent at The Academy may seem like something insignificant, but what is life if not a vast number of infinitesimal moments strung together? As the Italian author Cesare Pavese wrote, "We do not remember days, we remember moments." Obviously this particular moment had a marked effect on me; after all, this all took place six years ago, and I still remember it clearly. The experience helped me decide that because it made me feel so good to have an eighth grader be nice to me, when I became an eighth grader, I would be kind to the "little guys."

There have been times when I have had a phenomenally bad day; I forgot to study for a quiz, left my sweatshirt at home, tripped on the stairs, and jammed my finger in the car door, all before noon. Then, while I am eating one of my least favorite cafeteria lunches, a younger student tips the water jug too far and spills the crushed ice all over the table and floor. At that point, I want to scream, but after taking a few seconds to breathe deeply and remember my own lunchtime mishap so long ago, I smile, tell the child it's not important and clean the ice off the table, floor, and even me.

I always try to remember the dread I felt in the pit of my stomach when I thought an eighth grader *might* be angry at me, and I think how terrible I would have felt if he had actually become noticeably upset. Recalling that kind of experience can make a big difference in the lives of our younger students, and I believe that that positive difference is often passed on to future generations of Academy boys.

Thus, through small moments there form unbelievably strong bonds of kindness between the students. Because SAA is such a small school, one quickly experiences such tiny but significant moments, and one cultivates strong relationships with almost every student and faculty member. I know no other school in which the seniors can address almost any student in the school by his first name. This allows for a remarkable bonding between the students. I don't know a single eighth grader, past or present, who has not gone out of his way to give a little guy his small moment of the day, to cut his meat, pour his water, help him tie his shoe, talk to him when he's upset, or walk him to the nurse when he hurts himself or feels sick.

While the relationship between the older and younger students is amazing, there are also incredible bonds within the classes. For my class, the class of 2006, I believe our relationship is best stated in the caption under our group photograph in the yearbook of '04-'05. It says, "You know these guys are brothers because they always stab each other in the back on the small things, and they always cover each other's backs on the big things." This

may not sound like a ringing endorsement for our class's inter-group dynamics, but it is accurate. We argue over stupid things all the time, but when it's time to be serious, or when someone has a problem, we pull together and get serious or fix the problem.

I remember a moment during the leadership retreat early this school year when I attempted the T-Bar M ropes course. Like so many other such moments, it is probably insignificant in the greater scheme of things, yet powerfully significant to me. To even begin the ropes course, you must climb a wobbly, rickety contraption of rope ladder, logs, empty tires, and bits of telephone pole to reach the first platform. I got halfway up that monstrosity, and was convinced I could not go another inch. However, at no point during my hanging there did the stream of advice and encouragement from my classmates stop, and I eventually made it to the top and across the whole course. In one brief moment during the arduous climb, I realized something surprising: the encouragement I was receiving wasn't just coming from my close friends. Classmates I often disagree with were cheering just as loudly as some of my best friends. That made all the difference.

The Academy provides so many opportunities for students to come together in meaningful ways that seem to generate key dynamic moments in our lives. For example, this year, I was fairly certain I would not make the "A" basketball team, so I approached the coach and asked if I could be the manager of the team. He agreed, and I spent the past season as the eighth grade "A" team manager. In practice, however, the other members of the team treated me no differently than each other, except for occasional good-natured jokes when I would miss a shot they make easily. Even then, they would kindly advise me on how to shoot more accurately. Once in one of the first practices, I was discouraged because I had missed my last seven shots. A teammate approached and said, "Manager dude, that's not how you should shoot it!" He proceeded to show me the correct shot form, and thanks to that single friendly moment of camaraderie and assistance, I made three out of my next five shots. My basketball shot improved more in the several

months of the season than in my entire last year playing on the "B" team. Despite not being a great player, I was fully accepted into the team, which meant a lot to me.

Furthermore, aside from the relationships between younger students and older students and the inter-class relationships, there is another dimension to the school that supports my point. That is strength of the relationships between the students and faculty members, and their day-to-day interactions (chains of minor encounters that may go unnoticed at the time) that make their relationships just as strong as those among the students. The San Antonio Academy must have one of the most incredible faculty hiring teams in San Antonio, because every member of the staff fits perfectly in his or her respective area. Each primary teacher is as sweet as if she were one's own mother. The elementary level teachers are just strict enough to get you ready for the next grades, but incorporate enough entertainment to keep children enjoying school. The upper-school teachers do an incredible job connecting to the students on more equal terms, and all the teachers do an astounding job preparing children for high school, college, and life. Teachers are not the only significant faculty members, however. There are also the coaches, who manage to make P.E. fun; the lunch ladies, who provide excellent and nutritious food day in and day out; and the maintenance workers, who keep the school running behind the scenes. On a daily basis, all help provide a wide spectrum of apparently trivial, yet in actuality, life-shaping interactions, from which we benefit.

My small moments at The Academy have defined who I am; I would not be nearly the same if I had gone to some other school. I recognize I may have bludgeoned you over the head with the words "small moment," but the truth of the reality is the greatest thing about The Academy's small moments. They are so subtle, natural, fitting into the fabric of our lives so perfectly, until even if one is searching for them, one hardly ever catches one in progress. They are swift, silent instances, creating memories that last a lifetime, and I am grateful every day that I was lucky enough to get to

attend a magnificent school where the small moments each day help create the larger moments and experiences of our lives.