

JWebster: June 15, 2009

Some of Col. Bondurant's earliest memories as a child are in the dining hall of San Antonio Academy, where his father started teaching in 1920. In those days, The Academy had a boarding program, and if you worked for The Academy, boarding was a way of life; it was 24/7.

I'm looking now at a photograph of Col. Bondurant, age 10 or 11, clad in his full Academy uniform, and he's standing at the side of his father, Colonel Sr. Everybody I've met tells me that the minute you met Colonel Sr., you respected him. He commanded your respect, the same as Colonel Bondurant, Jr. Colonel Bondurant, Sr. is impeccably attired in a white linen suit, with a stylish fedora. But what stands out in the picture is the look on the face of Colonel's father. He's proud of his son and he loves his son, and that shows through. When I think of the Bondurant family, those three traits emerge: love, pride and respect. There's a strong sense of honor about this family.

Rather than share with you my own words, I'd like to read excerpts from a few of the hundreds of letters that have come in through the 24 years I've been here.

Scott: "Colonel B, always with a bow tie and always an amazingly positive influence. You made a difference in my life, Sir."

Gary: "I first met Colonel Bondurant years ago while reporting a news story for KENS TV. His demeanor, statuesque persona and charming character made a lasting impression. Through the years I've realized that Colonel was a symbol of leadership to be emulated by all the boys who attend San Antonio Academy."

Wallace: "There were teachers at The Academy that you liked, teachers that you feared, and teachers you liked to take advantage of, but you respected Colonel Bondurant. He never demanded your respect – he earned it. Over the years Colonel Bondurant has improved and enriched the lives of thousands and thousands of boys from South Texas and all around the world."

Brett: "I was in the third grade; I was new. About 30 minutes before Chapel, Colonel Bondurant called me into his office and helped me get my uniform together. He spent several minutes shining my shoes. It was a spit shine and they were perfect. Of course, I would spend the rest of my life trying to get my shoes just as perfect as he did in a few minutes. But the biggest thing that happened in those few minutes was how Colonel Bondurant, headmaster and the leader of my world at that time, was a servant, and showed a third grader at the bottom of the ladder how to start preparing for the day and every day that would follow. Colonel, thank you for showing me what it means to be a servant, a leader and a father."

Van: "I count you as a blessing in my life, Colonel. I recall fondly your warmth, your kind smile, your warm personality, your firm discipline when it was needed, your encouraging arm around my shoulder and your no-nonsense looks when I was about to get into mischief. Perhaps my favorite memory of you, Colonel Bondurant, is simply that of a friend. What a friend you were to me in difficult years! My mother

was seriously ill and my brother-in-law lost his life tragically. In those hard months you were a constant source of comfort, challenge and inspiration. I owe you a debt of gratitude that I can never fully repay.”

David: “I’m sitting here at my desk in Baghdad, Iraq. Sir, I think back to my first day at The Academy in the fall of 1984. I was very intimidated. I had issues with hyperactivity, and I was so scared as I walked up those stairs into the office. The first person I met was you. You immediately made the fear go away with the calmness and kindness in your voice, and started me on a journey that I still cherish today. And the journey is this: you had the amazing ability to make people see the best in themselves and strive to be the best they can be. You taught me confidence and kindness, compassion and so many other values that I hold dear to this day. Sir, your name is held in such regard that it will be spoken in reverence at The Academy forever. That is the legacy you have created through your example.”

Brian: “Colonel Bondurant was a strong father figure for all of us through our formative years. He symbolized certain moral and ethical absolutes.”

Susan (an Academy mom): “You set a standard of excellence that touched the life of my son in behavior, good manners, lasting friendships, love of country and reverence for God. Thank you for making a difference in the life of my son, Kevin.”

Light: “You are the living embodiment of the values that are The Academy.”

So, what are those values? Integrity, respect, pride in achievement, love - all anchored by love of God and country. Colonel Bondurant has touched the lives of thousands of boys who became men who made a positive difference in the world.

Colonel’s lessons: Character counts. Character endures.

We all have our Colonel Bondurant stories. I have mine, too. I made Colonel’s acquaintance in the early 80s. One autumn afternoon (it was a Wednesday, I think) the phone rang and Colonel said, “John, I’d like you to think about coming to The Academy.” I was respectful and flattered, Colonel could hear the hesitation in my voice. He said, “John, I’m going to visit The Academy boys who are attending at McCallie [which is where I was Director of Admissions] on Saturday, and I think I’ll stop by and see you on Saturday morning.”

Sure enough, Saturday morning at 11:30 (I don’t know how he found our house) Colonel walked up to the door, rang the doorbell, and my wife and I warmly welcomed him. He said, “I’m not going to sit down; I’m not going to stay. I want to see our boys.” But with a firm grip on my shoulder he looked at me and said, “I just want you to come to San Antonio and take a look, my boy.”

It was as if a bolt of lightning struck my heart.

My note to Colonel: “You entered my life quite unexpectedly and you changed my life quite profoundly. You have inspired me; exhorted me; taught me. You’ve improved my grammar immeasurably and you have loved me as if I were your son. I am here today because of you. You have defined who I am and what I do. You took me in, charted my course and taught me how to become a better man. In the process, you and Kay, Mamá and Papá, have become my parents. I love you both and thank you for adopting, raising, teaching and loving me unconditionally.”

Love: Carol, Linda, Tom and Kay said there was never a shortage of love in the Bondurant household. Never a shortage of love...

So, I’ll close by going back to a slide show Colonel made in 1984-85, his closing days as Head of School. It was a video, and he narrated the entire show, closing with these words: “The joy is watching these little boys come in as kindergarteners and first graders, and then years later watching them walk across the stage and just knowing that you were a part of it. Great teaching is love. If they know that you love them [and his voice cracked] they work for you and you struggle for them. Great teaching is love. Love is that which gaineth love.”

To Colonel, Kay and the Bondurant Family, you have gained much love. You have gained much respect as you have touched thousands and thousands of lives.