

Exploring

By Kate Reeves

It is pretty unbelievable that I'm standing here talking to you as a senior. It really does not feel like long ago that I was a small child running around the church, enchanted by the mystery of this place. Every part of this building is very familiar to me now, but when I was little, and was told that the Bliss House was a very very old building, I was convinced I would find a secret room or a secret doorway somewhere. I kid you not, the rest of the kids and I used to spend about an hour after church each week (as our parents sat in on boring meetings), chasing each other around as we sought to find some hidden door behind a bookcase or other kinds of clues. We had three pretty big successes on our adventures (if I do say so myself): the Secret Staircase, the Kids Office, and The Tree. The Secret Staircase, known more plainly to the general populous as "the emergency staircase behind the common room" was my first proof that there were in fact mysterious places in this building just waiting to be found. Of course, the adults were not very keen about the idea of kids stampeding down a staircase that read "fire exit only" and subtly hinted that it was prohibited while trying not to suppress our imaginations. So, naturally, we invested our energy in the Kids' Office, a storage closet that was being used for, well... storage. However, seemingly unbeknownst to the adults, this closet was full of hidden treasures. It had a bookcase full of religious books and bibles, a desk with oodles of office supplies, and random knick knacks of church merchandise – I mean what was there for kids not to love! This was quickly transformed into the "headquarters" for all kid activities after church. We assigned positions, created a mini bureaucracy, and looking back on it, I kind of wish I had written a college essay entitled "*how the kids office subconsciously made me want to go into*

politics". Last but certainly not least is The Tree – the big willow in the back that you've probably see kids disappearing under on Sunday afternoons in the summer. It looks like a regular tree on the outside, but underneath it, is a vast open space with vines that hang down and ample opportunity for swinging. Walking under it was like walking into narnia – suddenly you were hidden from the rest of the world and left to explore within the infinite borders of your imagination.

The point of me recollecting all of this... besides just fueling my childhood nostalgia, is to convey to you that I grew up *knowing* this church was mine. It belonged to me, just as it belonged to everyone else. We were never hushed as we clammored about the emergency staircase during all the meetings. We were always supported in our endeavors to organize the storage closet into an operating base for our shenanigans. Our sacred playground of the tree was respected by all.

These things may sound trivial but they created a foundation that allowed me to love going to church. And honestly, love and church were not words that most of my friends used in the same sentence. Church for most people growing up was stiff and rigid. Church for me was synonymous with freedom.

This same liberating experience held true as I grew older and church transitioned from a venue for physical exploration to a venue for spiritual exploration. This church taught me to question, to think, to love boundlessly. It taught me that faith is so much more than doctrine, it's independence. It's being able to contextualize life experiences, having the courage to allow yourself to doubt, and the wisdom to evolve. I learned here that things won't always make sense, but there will always be solutions, the greatest of which is Love. If we live our life in love,

differences won't be a barrier but a bridge. Heartache will hurt, but the medicine of laughter will slowly heal it. A divided world will not be begging for more hate, it will be begging for you to show it how a true Christian lives.

This Christian lifestyle is something that was modelled to me by the example set by so many I have met here. This has always been one of the most accepting places I knew, but one thing it has never accepted is indifference. Indifference to poverty, to hunger, to racism, to homophobia, to sexism, to any form of human suffering. The passion that all of you have to simply care and to activate into becoming that great solution of love... *that* is contagious, inspiring passion.

When you have that kind of passion, when you have roots in that strong commitment to love, you really don't need to know all the answers, you can still be on your journey of discovery, you can still be exploring. To "walk humbly with God" to me means knowing you love something without necessarily being able to understand why; knowing you believe something without necessarily being able to articulate why.

While this building is no longer mysterious to me, life and faith in many ways still are. But I'm ok with that, I'm ok with not knowing all the answers as long as I know what I have learned here: that nothing is too small to be ignored and nothing is too big that love cannot overcome it.

So yes, the Secret Staircase, the Kids' Office, the Tree... Questioning, Loving, and being Inspired. These are all things that have made me a part of this church. But most importantly, these are things that have made this church a prominent, palpable, persistent part of me.