

# Grade-school friends from Burlington County see offspring carry on a family tradition

By Sally Friedman Correspondent | Posted: Sunday, June 21, 2015 6:30 am

They are friends. Such good friends.

You can hear it in the way they can finish one another's sentences, the way they laugh over shared memories, and as they wander the halls of a place they all have loved.

It was at Westfield Friends, from pre-K to eighth grade, that David Shields, of Cinnaminson, Dr. J.T. Thurber, of Medford Lakes, and Eric Ransome, of Shamong, first met.

The fact that they graduated from Westfield back in 1988, and then scattered to different high schools, hasn't halted this unique brotherhood one bit.

So tight is this trio that when Thurber got married, Shields officiated at the wedding, thanks to a special dispensation to conduct the ceremony, and Ransome was best man.

Today, all of them are fathers and all of their children are either at the school or are about to be.

On a recent afternoon, these dad-grads of the Quaker school in Cinnaminson gathered to recollect, reflect and revisit what it means to them to share not just the past and the present, but also the future via their kids.

"Westfield was, and is, a very special place," said Shields, "and it does leave you with very special memories. So when we thought about where we wanted our kids to be, my wife actually called when Logan was born, and made sure to get her on the waiting list." Logan is now in second grade.

Rylan Shields is in Westfield's prekindergarten, and baby Emerson will be when the time comes.

In so many ways, it is not just the love of alma mater that has kept the friendship alive; it is also the experience of fatherhood.



J.T. Thurber (from left), Eric Ransome and David Shields reminisce while standing on the steps of the Westfield Friends School.

“Our children will grow up together,” said Shields, a HVAC technician who loves how Westfield taught him life values along with core subjects.

Dentist Thurber’s children, Brayson and Sadie James, are in first grade and pre-K, respectively, and are the third generation to attend Westfield Friends. His mother was in the class of 1952.

“What we experienced here carried us into adulthood, and now our children will learn the core values we did,” he said.

As they wandered the hallways reminiscing about how fatherhood means seeing to it that kids get those values at home and at school, the 41-year-olds ran into a couple of their former teachers.

There were hugs all around, and reminiscences of bygone days with Liz Martino, of Palmyra, and Catherine Michel, of Cherry Hill.

Martino and Michel remembered the “three musketeers” as they affectionately called them.

“We love when our former students become parents, and send their kids to us,” said Martino. “Even though this is a place where kids feel safe and cared about, we live in the real world.”

Shields, Thurber and Ransome said becoming fathers has made them more conscious of what family means, and what they want for their children.

“Our connection is really important to all of us,” said Ransome, a sales executive for his family’s equipment company in Evesham. Ransome’s daughter Grace is in kindergarten, and his son, Mason, will be in pre-K next year. “That’s why we want all of our kids to get the tangibles and intangibles of an education that teaches self-reliance, accountability and responsibility.”

That deep sense of connection each family feels with the others is evident in the shared birthday parties, holiday celebrations and a group favorite: the Canoe Carnival in Medford Lakes.

The dads, their three wives, and the seven children among them feel like family.

Nobody is quite sure how or why the men bonded so instantly and permanently, but they do know that fatherhood is richer and sweeter when there are buddies who know how it feels when a child is having a problem, or when a child makes the outside world tip away in those parenting moments that sometimes are easier felt than explained.

“We know each other so well that sometimes we don’t even need the words,” said Ransome.

The thoughts about fatherhood in some ways mirror the way that Westfield Friends taught them to live their lives.

One of the constant lessons, said Shields, was about personal responsibility. “If you broke a window by accident, it wasn’t enough to get your parents to pay for it. You actually had to help with the repair. That was part of Westfield’s code.”

Bullying? Unacceptable.

Respecting differences? Basic to the Westfield creed.

The lessons learned in the school on Riverton Road prepared the men for fatherhood.

“We certainly weren’t thinking about it then,” said Thurber, “but the Westfield values we got, and that our children will get, are actually timeless.”

While parenthood is never without its challenges, the grown-ups come to the title fortified.

“The importance of being a good person, and respecting others,” said Shields, “is one of the life lessons we got at Westfield. That’s a lesson that never changes. And maybe our biggest job as fathers is to teach that to our kids.”