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[HOME](#) | [LOCAL](#) | [NATIONAL](#) | [COMMENTARY](#) | [CLASSIFIED](#) | [ARCHIVE](#) | [CONTACT](#)

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[Local Commentary](#)

[National Commentary](#)

[Arts & Entertainment](#)

[Sports](#)

Timber Lane Elementary School Celebrates 50 Years Full of Changes & Traditions

By Darien Bates

Bobbie Ricks started his drive to Timber Lane Elementary School Tuesday morning early, coming up Interstate 95 to the place where he worked as a sixth grade teacher for 30 years. But unlike those 30 years commuting from his old home in Prince George's County, Maryland, this morning's commute was a bit longer, starting at his current home in rural North Carolina, where he has lived in retirement for the past two years.

Still, the attraction of the place where he spent the majority of his working life seldom fails to draw Ricks back, as he substitute teaches at times when needed, and visits his old

friends and colleagues the opportunity presents itself.

Ricks isn't the only person who has developed a deep love for the school, and when Timber Lane holds its 50th anniversary bash this Saturday, there are many who will, like Ricks does on occasion, return and show appreciation for the place that provided an education and community whether as teacher or student.

Built in 1954, Timber Lane has been a home away from home for Fairfax County students for five decades, and during that time has seen a variety of changes, from physical alterations to a dramatically evolving student population.

But while the school may seem drastically different from the two hallway brick structure first erected along West Street in Falls Church, there are many things that haven't changed over the years. As teachers and students have come and gone, new textbooks purchased, administrators moved in and out, the school has managed to keep a personal connection with the community, helping it react quickly and effectively to the new needs of its students.

Ricks started as a teacher at Timber Lane in 1970, 15 years after the school opened and five years after it was desegregated. As young black man, trying to wait out the Vietnam War by working as a physical education teacher for Timber Lane and two other area schools, Ricks wasn't planning on becoming a teacher. He had never even worked with young children before.

He quickly realized that physical education wasn't where he wanted to be. He didn't like trying to teach sports and activities to kids who seemed to have an inexhaustible supply of energy.

Instead he asked to be moved into the classroom, a slightly more controlled environment and discovered he had a real love for teaching.

"Every year I told myself I would do it one more year," he said. Ricks finally retired in 1999, 30 years after he started teaching.

Ricks said that throughout his work at Timber Lane he has seen significant changes, making teaching a constant challenge and adventure, never letting him get bored.

During his first years at Timber Lane, Ricks said that not only were the majority of the students white, but he remembers being the only black teacher as well.

After several years, the addition of affordable housing near the school brought with it a new influx of black students. Where before, Ricks had had four or five African American students in a class, he was now seeing nine or ten.

Then in the 1980s, a new wave of Hispanic and other immigrant families moved into the area, once again changing the face of Timber Lane, and requiring Ricks to adapt to teaching students without a strong familiarity with the English language.

At first this created some difficulty for Ricks, but new funding and policies brought in specialists who helped teach English as a Second Language curriculum (ESL) and deal with issues like counseling and special education, enabling Ricks and other teachers to focus on the subjects rather than simply worrying about communicating with their students.

Despite the challenges each change has brought, Ricks said he has learned a lot from a diverse group of students. Contrary to the images in the media that, he said, often portray many minorities, and specifically Hispanics, as less focused on education, many of his most dedicated students, and families of those students, were first generation Hispanic-Americans.

"If you want to talk about parents who stand behind you for their children's education, they're as dedicated as anyone," he said.

He also said that the diversity has kept the classroom dynamic. While some of his friends teaching in other schools talked about wanting to move to a different school for a new atmosphere, Ricks said that demographic shifts kept Timber Lane interesting.

“It was just like working at three different schools,” he said.

It didn't matter which incarnation of Timber Lane he was teaching at, though, he refused to change his style. “I used to load them down with homework, double on weekends,” he said.

He joked that his students would tell him he was mean, that they hated him, that he was the worst teacher ever, all the while trying to keep from smiling. Later many invited him to their graduations and even weddings.

He continues to receive letters from old students, thanking him for the preparation he gave them for life.

One of his students who vividly remembers her old sixth grade teacher is Melissa Munoz, 28, who now has two sons attending the school. Along with attending the school herself, Munoz's uncle, and several cousins, attended as well. She said that the close relationship between families and teachers made the school a special place when she was a student and now gives her confidence, as a parent, that her children are being taken care of.

Especially important to Munoz are the opportunities more recently offered by Timber Lane with a modified schedule, first initiated in 1998.

Rather than the traditional school schedule with a short winter break and a three month summer vacation, the modified schedule works around nine week quarter-semester, separated by four three-week vacations.

The change was implemented in 1998, after three years of planning, in order to improve retention and attainment in an increasingly diverse student population, and to provide classes for students that would build on what they learned from their standard classes.

Assistant Principal Diane Connelly was in charge of leading the planning process. A graduate of Fairfax County schools and a long time physical education teacher at Timber Lane, Connelly was very familiar with the students' needs and the frustration teachers had about the retention over the summer break.

“We saw the writing on the wall,” she said.

The change has proven to be a great success for everyone. As expected, students have been better able to advance from year to year without forgetting what they learned over the summer.

A less expected benefit, the additional intercession classes have also allowed teachers to try something new, working with different age groups and offering classes not normally part of a standard curriculum, like teaching math through cooking or origami.

And parents, like Munoz, love the schedule. Rather than having to find diversions and child care for their children over the long summer months, she can instead count on them going to intercession classes and then take a vacation when she can take time off from work.

Even the students have embraced the year round schedule. Munoz's son, Dominique, has chosen to take classes every intercession, enjoying the extra opportunities to learn and see his friends. His favorite class pairs up older students with younger kids, as a form of mentoring, to create a community across the different age groups.

“All the little kids think you're the coolest because you're the oldest in the school,” Dominique said.

Even Ricks, who admitted that he initially opposed the change, said that the year-round schedule is a fantastic idea. Ricks spent one year under the new schedule before he retired.

“I fought it and didn't like it until that first year,” he said. “I wish they had started it years before.”

But the change in schedule is only one of many alterations over the 50 year history of the school.

Originally designed around two hallways, the school was expanded in 1969 under the guidance of Principal Catherine Brady. Eight new classrooms were added, a library, music and band rooms, a science lab and a cafeteria.

In 1987, two more hallways were added to house the third and fourth grade classrooms, and then a 1995 renovation brought necessary improvements to the library, the gym, and an overall unity to the school, creating a brighter, more comfortable learning environment.

Now under Principal Anita Blaine, the school is working to handle new challenges while retaining the strength of their traditionally close community. For years they have worked to better integrate their special education programs and ESL students within standard classes and they are now progressing towards adding an in-school gifted and talented program, rather than sending students to other schools.

Recently, the addition of the Standards of Learning Tests that require all students to perform at a certain level, has added some new stress to the teachers and administrators, as they find themselves at times trying to prepare recently enrolled students, who hardly speak a word of English, to take tests they can't understand.

Despite those problems, students have continued to pass the mandated tests and the school remains accredited under the nationally imposed standards. Nevertheless, Blain insists there is so much more to the education Timber Lane provides.

"Numbers don't tell everything," she said.

Like Munoz, Blain pointed to a dynamic community of teachers, administrators and parents. "A test score may not reflect the caring and nurturing environment."

To keep a strong connection between the parents and school, Timber Lane hosts a series of parent education classes, teaching everything from helping kids with homework to constructive discipline techniques. The school serves dinner beforehand to make the classes a family occasion.

Even with the focus on involving parents, Blain knows that in a school where many of the parents are struggling to make ends meet, the teachers are given a lot more responsibility in the life of every child, especially for ESL students, who aren't just learning standard subjects, but also how to get by in an entirely new country.

"We're trying to help children fit into a culture," she said. "We're working with the whole child, not just the academic part."

At the end of this school year, Blain will be moving on to another school, taking on new challenges at the larger Wolf Trap Elementary in Vienna. But like Ricks and many others who have gone before, she said there are things she is taking with her as she goes, the biggest of which are the personal relationships. "I think it's something Timber Lane does especially well," she said.

This Saturday, May 7, from 11 a.m. until 3 p.m., as the school celebrates its 50th, former and current students and teachers, will come together and share that community at least one more time. As students enjoy the talent show, a dunking booth and plenty of food, they can also take comfort in the people who walked the same hallways and sat in the same classrooms over the past half century.

For Ricks, who admitted he will miss the event due to a family reunion, the excitement over the anniversary is no surprise. "You can see why I wanted to be here for as long as I was," he said with a smile.

