

Memories of Mr. Julian King

Written and delivered at a Julian King Scholarship Meeting
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I am delighted to be here tonight and see so many old familiar faces. There are three young faces – our Julian King Scholars – Shanna, Avis and Shawn whom I met when they were 5 years old and came dragging their lunch boxes into kindergarten. Shanna was in my class and Avis in Mrs. Adams' and Shawn in Mrs. Herbert's. Mr. King was their principal. We at Johnson School are very proud of you, your hard work and accomplishments and your dedication – you showed us that you came to school to learn. At your 5th grade graduation at Johnson, you and your classmates stood while your teachers and parents wept and sang the school song including the words: “We will always love and cherish memories of you …..” All of you have many wonderful memories of Mr. King, and I have been asked to share a few of my memories. Most of my recollections revolve around his love of life and his deep enjoyment of the fun of working with children at Johnson School.

But first I want you to understand that Mr. King was a man of deep faith. It was his religion that guided him like a compass – a North Star – in his everyday encounters. Mr. King's life was an example of his faith in action. He believed that you need to love life to understand life and you need to love what you do. He taught us to rejoice in our many gifts and talents and to give a helping hand to others. As our principal, he showed us by example how to work hard, how to achieve, how to deal with setbacks and the dark times. He worked to instill within each child a sense of school pride and the belief that we come to school to learn. He also showed us that life can be filled with mirth, laughter, sheer joy and frequent silliness.

My memory of Mr. King is of a man with a broad smile, a flushed face, a high and hearty laugh, and a silly fluttering eyelid wink. His shoulders would start going up and down as he laughed and he would play with the keys and coins in his deep pockets.

His face was the frequent target for the soggy wet sponge toss at the Fun Festival – “Hey Jason, let's see you wind it up and miss,” he would cajole the sponge pitcher.

At our staff parties and get-togethers, he would howl at the gag gift exchange – the turkey foot, the dreadful lamp shade, the hula dancer statue, the lava lamp, the old model T horn that didn't work – perhaps it could play “Silent Night.” He loved to stand around a piano with the faculty and staff and sing all the songs with tenor parts. These are such tender happy memories.

I remember when our kindergarten classes went to Jim Murray's Panorama Farm. Mr. King sat in the hay wagon, his big ten gallon gray hat on, straw sticking

out of his mouth, surrounded by about 80 kids all wanting to sit on his lap. We sang "Old McDonald Had a Farm," and Mr. King would make great animal noises and all the children would howl and roll around on the hay when he did his imitation of a pig. We all oinked, mooed, barked and quacked till we had tears rolling down our cheeks. He looked at me and said, "We all need to have more fun in our lives." On the way home from the field trip, we ate granola that we had made. We had roasted all the grains, honey, and raisins together. The raisins came out like little cinders. Mr. King crunched down on a sticky raisin cinder and got it caught in his bridge. He said to me with his mouth clenched shut: "Just what did you put in this?" The little boy next to him replied: "I think we put in rocks!"

Mr. King became accustomed to our "burnt offerings" that we sent up to his office on a weekly basis. He liked the Wonder Woman Waffles, Kay's Kindergarten Kabobs, Maggie's Marvelous Milkshake, Carolyn's Cocoa and Donut Dan from the frying pan. We read the book, Green Eggs and Ham and sent him a taste of green eggs. He came down to our room with the little Dixie cup filled with green froth and a plastic spoon. He said, "I do not like green eggs and ham. I do not like them Sam I Am." All the kids laughed and cheered because they didn't like green eggs either.

Each child who celebrated a birthday at school brought a special cupcake for Mr. King. It was the largest of the litter with extra thick fudge icing and too many sprinkles on top. "May I take this to Mr. King?" – and so the dance of the sugar plum confection would leave for the office where it would be deposited on the long wooden counter near Mrs. Walker's desk. Mr. King would be summoned and he would dutifully eat every morsel. "This is the best cupcake," and the birthday child would return to the classroom feeling as if he/she had been knighted by the King with a culinary arts degree.

Mr. King once told me that he had found a secret quiet place in school where he could hide out for about 15 minutes and have lunch without interruptions. I said, "That sounds great. Where is it?" He said, "I'm not telling you."

I am sure many of you remember our kindergarten soup suppers. We still have them. All day long, we chop and dice vegetables. In the evening all the kindergarten parents and siblings and household members would come to the school cafeteria and share a soup dinner. Some years we would serve 300 and after everyone left, Mr. King would be in the kitchen with us washing dishes, mopping the floor and cleaning out the giant soup vat. It was such fun being with him as we rattled pots and pans and sang and joked. In spite of our exhaustion or a 12-hour workday, we would be filled with a deep appreciation for our late night fellowship in the kitchen. Mr. King loved what he did. And we knew that "we were family."

Mr. King was a frequent visitor to our classroom. I remember one of the first times Mr. King came into my class to see how I worked with Cuisenaire rods. A little boy named Billy had just gone into the bathroom. I continued with the lesson and suddenly Billy flew out of the bathroom and came running up to me yelling, "I can't

find it." "You can't find it," I repeated. "No, it's gone! It's lost!" I saw Mr. King's face flush and his shoulders beginning to go up and down. I looked down at Billy, He was wearing big bibbed overalls and his father's long white shirt. Out of the zipper, he had pulled yards and yards of shirttail. I then realized what Billy had lost. "Billy, you go back into the bathroom, take down your overalls and I am sure you will find what you have lost."

Another time Mr. King caught me teaching the school song to the students. He stood there listening to the children sing: "Hail to James G. Johnson School, Hail all hail to you." His face beamed with pride. A little child suddenly asked, "Why are we singing for everybody to go to hell?" Mr. King left the classroom with his shoulders going up and down, laughing to himself.

Mr. King caught me in one of those teachable moments. He was working with clay at the art table learning how to roll out coils of clay to make a coiled bowl. A little child named Gabe, a former Julian King scholar, came up to us and said, "I need to go to the office and take my medicine at one o'clock, but I don't know when one o'clock is." In my best teacher response, I turned to the clock at the back of the room and said, "When the big hand is on the 12 and the little hand is on the one, then it is one o'clock." Gabe looked down at his hands and turned them back and forth a few times. Then he looked at me and Mr. King and said, "But both of my hands are the same size!"

Mr. King liked to be in our classrooms. He rarely left a kindergarten room without paint, paste, marker, or children's fingerprints on his clothing. The kids loved to hug him. He was such a loving, powerful father figure to so many. He wanted to make sure we had the tools and materials we needed in our rooms. I asked him for a rocking chair so I could sit and read to my children. The next day, on the multi-colored rug, sat his rocking chair from the office. It was the one he had made by hand. It was a gift so I could sit and rock and read. It would be a place to sit and rock children who needed comforting from the stormy blast and difficulties of growing up, an author's chair, a place where youngsters could sit side by side and share their precious books, sing songs and chant poetry. At the end of the day, I went upstairs and walked into Mr. King's office. His desk was piled high with notes, memos and books. These were the days before we had computers at school. (Mrs. Walker was Mr. King's personal computer and spell checker. She never lost a file.) On his desk was a picture of his wife Mary and their two children, young Julian and Lillian. They were a very close and loving family. I thanked Mr. King for the rocking chair. He said that he was glad to get it out of the office. It gave him a little bit more room. I looked at Mr. King, smiled, admired his stacks of papers and said, "Nice desk." He looked at me and said with a wink in his eye, "Well, you're not getting it." We both laughed.

These are some of my memories of Julian King. He was a man of faith, a man of laughter, a man who loved learning. He was a loving father figure for hundreds of

students and the principal of Johnson School for 16 years. Our motto continues to be, "We are family."

The Julian King Foundation puts his faith in learning, caring and family spirit into action. You students from our Johnson family have proven that you do come to school to learn. We feel honored to support you as you continue to learn. Remember that you can come "home" to Johnson School. You are always welcome to return to the Julian King Library at Johnson and share your successes and your trials and your stories with us.

And to Mr. King, "We will always love and cherish memories of you."