

Three Years, Two Capital Campaigns, and Two Major Building Projects

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Two decades ago, Bradenton Christian School penned an aggressive long-range plan full of faith and vision. She wanted a Fine Arts Facility, a middle school building and then a new gym for her campus consisting of an elementary building, a sixth grade building, a secondary building and a gym, all with dirt parking lots. Fifteen years ago, the Fine Arts Building was built with the help of a few key donors and the generosity of school parents and grandparents. Six years ago, I took the position of superintendent of Bradenton Christian School, the school I started teaching at in 1988, before moving away.

When I started as superintendent, the 6<sup>th</sup> grade building was condemned due to a leaky roof and no funds to fix it or the damage caused by the water running down inside the walls. There was a group of parents with a vision to turn the building into an athletic building with locker rooms and a weight room. We started fund-raising and had the total \$500,000 in hand by the time the finishing touches were going on the newly refurbished Mary Jane Spencer Athletic Building. We now had a new sports facility to help our teams. Two modern locker rooms, a weight room and bathrooms for outdoor sporting events were now in the space where we used to teach our 6<sup>th</sup> graders. The new locker rooms and a real weight room were much appreciated! Our teams had to lift weights in a cramped oversized closed on stage in the old gym before this blessing. The Pittsburgh Pirates, who run Spring Training in Bradenton, helped us with some gently used weight equipment for our new weight room. It helps that one of their coaches' wives teaches at Bradenton Christian School and he was a board member too. Their manager, Clint Hurdle, even spoke at one of our fund-raising Galas. Thank you, Pirates. Finding money for athletics was easy compared to our next project, the leaky roof of our elementary building.

We had elementary teachers who would cover their desks with garbage bags before leaving school for the day whenever rain was in the forecast. I remember tears flowing down one of their faces after a particularly damaging rain event. Despite the pain, it was hard to get people excited to give to fix things rather than for new items so we ended up pulling money out of operating and out of our capital budget to pay for this fix. The teachers were excited by the success, however.

The next year at one of our Parent Association meetings, I surprised our board by announcing that we were going to eventually build a middle school building next to our current secondary school building. I think they just smiled at my naïve optimistic outlook on our future.

They didn't know yet that I was having lunches with a wise donor who kept telling me that money follows vision and I should be promoting what I want our campus to look like in the years ahead. The next lunch I had with a different donor, one with amazing resources, took a wonderful turn when she asked me if I would rather have a full time IT person, or that middle school building I was talking about? I appreciate a good IT person as much as the next guy, but I was all over the new building. Her gift of \$2.4 million, toward a \$3.6 million middle school building was the push we all needed to make our dream become a reality. We interviewed several builders and wisely settled on a school family to do the job as general contractor. We met with the neighbors and overcame their concerns, met with the city to get our site plan

approval, and signed the contract to have it built. The neighbor most directly impacted came out the best. Our general contractor really took care of her for her trouble of noise, dust and a changing view as a building took shape where there were only trees before. She ended up with her irrigation system upgraded, a new coat of paint on her house and a new fence for her trouble. She is now a big fan of Bradenton Christian School.

The fun part for me came next, choosing the technology, furniture, decorations and amenities for the offices and classrooms. The building would be two story, as there is not much space next to our current high school building, and hold 9 classrooms and three offices. 17,761 square feet of new space to educate our middle school students started to come to life. We did our research and decided to give many different seating options for our students throughout the day to keep them engaged in their learning. We have offered Kagan style learning instruction to all of our teachers in professional development days. Most of the classrooms have four triangular shaped desks moved together to form a table for four. Most Kagan activities involve four students working together. Our chemistry lab upstairs has lab tables with gas, water and electric in each table for student use in experiments. The students sit in elevated lab chairs that swivel and have a high back and arms for comfort in the lab. Our Bible classroom has the coolest seating option. We have stand up desks with stools available in the Bible classroom. The desks have a swing-bar at the bottom and when you walk by the room you see a lot of body's feet swinging back and forth and the minds of those bodies are fully engaged in the learning. We added a lot of technology to the rooms also, short throw projectors, speakers, Chromebooks for every student, a WiFi Meraki in each room, and Surface tablets and laptops for teachers. There are TV's in the hallways where we display our announcements or highlights from a recent middle school game. Finally, the color scheme is orange and blue, our school colors, including some soft carpet in the extra wide hallways.

With the fine arts building and middle school building accomplished, our dreams turned to a new gym and fields. We just didn't see a way forward financially after stretching our constituency financially with the \$3.6 million dollar middle school just finished debt free.

Our gym was built in the 1970's with mainly volunteer labor. It is a classic cracker box Hoosiers type gym with all of two and a half feet from the end-line to running into the wall and bleachers two feet off the court on one side as well. There are now issues with leaks, faulty scoreboards, rodents, bathroom sewer issues, and overworked old air conditioning units.

Our fields are a mixture of grass, weeds and sand. Mainly sand. We irrigate and care for the grass. It just doesn't grow. Realistically, it doesn't have a chance. We practice football on our field daily, then play our games on it. This really tears up the grass. Then, when football is mercifully over for the year, we start soccer the next day on the same grass, practices and games. This creates holes and problems. We really could use some artificial grass that could stand up to the pounding.

As I stated earlier, money follows vision. We laid out plans for a new gym to replace our current gym and a new field to replace the failing grass. God showed up larger than we ever envisioned.

A grandfather of one of our current families is a very successful business owner who started his career as a teacher and basketball coach. He and his wife wanted to watch their grandchildren play basketball in a much nicer gym than our current cracker box gymnasium. We showed him our ambitious plans for a new gym and fields that cost, gulp, \$12 million dollars. He said they would like to contribute \$10 million towards the cause. We had some tears of joy and shared prayers and hugs and excitement! We met with contractors and once again settled on the school family general contractor who had done our new middle school to do the job. As we talked more about the gym, our donors expressed a wish for four full basketball courts instead of just two. Our administration expressed a wish for more classrooms and a cafeteria. Our athletic department wanted a training room and a larger weight-room. Coaches wanted large locker rooms. The general contractor took all of this, including a new football stadium with artificial turf and lights for baseball, soccer, football and softball! The bill grew to, double gulp, \$19 million!

We had lunch with the donor and presented the proposal. My heart was pounding. He did a double and triple take and said he would discuss with his wife. We met with him and his wife a week later. That gave us all plenty of time to pray. It was time for the next meeting. He started by saying they really wanted to help us with this project and his lovely wife added... by giving you \$17 million. It is still a surreal moment in my memory. They want to use what God has blessed them with to bless others. We will use this to Prepare the Hearts and Minds of God's Children!

This was going to take a lot of talking with our neighbors. The light poles going in would be 90 feet high. The stadium would be close to some of their property lines in their backyards. Trees would have to come down. There would be a lot more activity back there. We scheduled two meetings with the neighbors to help answer questions and alleviate concerns. Our general contractor, board members, engineers and I met with the neighbors and listened. We tried our best to alleviate their concerns about noise, lights, and the interruption of their daily lives. This would take sight plan approval, passed at the City Council Meeting. Our architects, Fawley Bryant, light company, Musco Lighting, and land engineers, Zoler Najjar, all helped present our case at the meeting. Musco, in particular, showed how the light would not spill over into the neighborhood. With most of the concerns already addressed in our neighborhood meetings, the council listened to a few objectors, and then voted unanimously to allow us to proceed! I walked the street behind the school and passed out gift cards to our immediate neighbors. Most of them were very gracious. One of them responded with "You were given \$19 million, and you are only giving me \$50!" You can't win them all.

We did a great ground breaking ceremony with our donor and his family, television stations, newspapers, the board, local dignitaries, our student body and parents. We sang the national anthem, prayed, had our drumline play, threw out little rubber sports balls to the crowd and our main donor and I got a chance to speak. We then unveiled a new 100 lb. metal statue of a Panther that will be going in the new building and started the earth mover to break ground.

Everyone was excited but really had no idea just how nice this facility was going to be. The project really included something for everyone on campus. The baseball field was quickly demolished and we were off to the races. There were many side projects added to the project that happened quickly. We added a new bathroom facility near the elementary since the athletic building we just finished a few years ago had bathrooms our elementary students used. The athletic building was coming down to make way for a new baseball diamond. We added bollards in front of the elementary student pick up area to keep students safe during pick up in case someone accidentally hit the gas instead of the brake. We had another challenge to overcome with this project. This was my favorite addition, a cement sidewalk that allowed our wheelchair bound elementary student to finally access the basketball courts so he could play there with his friends. We posted this on social media and it was our most viewed and most shared post of the year.

I mentioned demolishing the four-year-old athletic building that had to come down for a newer one. This was the Mary Jane Spencer Athletic Building. Considering the Spencer family had just helped us build this building in the last few years, it was key that we communicated clearly and carefully. We talked with this family and all the others who really helped us construct the building about to come down. Praise the Lord all these families were very understanding and excited about the new project that was coming. We suggested naming the weight room in the new building the Mary Jane Spencer Weight Room and the Spencers were pleased with that solution.

When going for site plan approval from the city, we added two new, really nice signs by the road out front. Our city is very picky about signs. I think the breadth of this project somewhat overwhelmed the city council as they barely took the time to question the signs. As a result, we will have two large concrete block signs out front with Bradenton Christian School "Preparing the Hearts and Minds of God's Children" on the front and "No Greater Joy than to Hear my Children are Walking in the Truth" on the back.

How do you build a 65,000 square foot building in the middle of a campus with 860 students on it? Well, our General Contractor figured it out. We blocked off parts of the campus with fencing, created a way for work trucks and workers to access the site without interacting with students, and created a new traffic pattern to allow this to happen. This meant administrators would be outside directing traffic in the heat of the Florida sun, but that is a small price to pay for progress. That is what I kept telling them.

The gym was up first, then the fields. Our first big problem was rainwater. We sit rather low in the Florida sand and part of our fields are in the flood plain. There was no room for a large retention pond so we would have to build a vault under the football field to hold floodwaters at bay. We built a \$500,000 rainwater vault under our fields. It looks like a massive basement from up north with no floor. This would hold water until it could seep down into the sand. Large downspouts and pipes from the roof of the new gym would deliver the water. The artificial turf field would go over this structure. Next was the presence of an invasive species, Brazilian Pepper

Trees, in need of removal way on the end of our property. When we took them out, we could clearly see our neighbors across the street. They had never seen us before, just trees. They showed up in droves in my office to complain about their new view. I explained to them how we had to remove an invasive species when doing a project. We would replace them with nicer, more appropriate, Florida native trees. They weren't happy, but I think they eventually will be. Finally, the 90 feet tall lights were a shock to some neighbors, but we explained how there will be no light spilling into the neighborhood.

As the building was taking shape, we decided to share the joy with our school families by letting them write scripture on the floors of the gym. The construction crew cleaned the cement floor and we gave Sharpies to all who came. The new wood floor will go in over the scripture, but His word will always be on the foundation.

The new building is special. There are four new basketball floors. One will be a rubber type surface perfect for the floor of a cafeteria for eating lunch on folding tables. The tables will roll into storage and we can have PE, basketball, wrestling or volleyball there. The other three courts will be wood floors. This means we can host tournaments with four basketball or volleyball games going on all at once. We can host large wrestling tournaments. Many teams can practice all at once. Our main gym will have an amazing light and sound system. The scoreboards will be video boards. There will be bleachers for 500 spectators. From the bleachers, you can watch the game, look through a large window into the weight room and all the way out windows on the other side to the football field. There are four classrooms. There is skybox with balcony seating looking out over the gym and the fields. The outdoor balcony is large enough for hundreds of fans to watch baseball, football or soccer. There will be nine offices and a conference room upstairs in the gym. Our admissions office will be in this new beautiful building. There are video screens all over so you can keep watching the game in progress on the screen as you order your hotdog at concessions.

The fields will also be great! We have lights now for all our outdoor sports. The artificial turf will stand up to all the pounding of practices and games. Our community will enjoy the new stadium and new experience.

We see great consequences coming from such an upgrade to our campus. Enrollment will likely trend upwards. Our current families will have a more positive experience. We can raise money through renting our facility. It creates a buzz about our school. Praise the Lord for vision and donors who buy into the vision of "Preparing the Hearts and Minds of God's Children."

Our next project is working on 40 acres of land just given to the school by another amazing donor. She has the vision for a new Christian school in an agricultural area where new houses are popping up everywhere. There is not another Christian school nearby, so we are making plans for a large k-12 Christian school. We want the city's approval now, while many of the neighbors are currently still cows. Cows don't voice their concerns about Pepper trees, lights, and noise.