

## Rally for closed school a class act

By Peter Gelzinis | Saturday, October 13, 2007 | <http://www.bostonherald.com> | **Columnists**

The giant key may have been fashioned out of cardboard and wrapped in tinfoil, but the joy it unlocked in Brighton's Oak Square yesterday was all too real.

It's been two years and four months since the Archdiocese of Boston abruptly evicted more than a hundred toddlers and grade-schoolers from their venerable brick school building.

So, it was only fitting that many of those same children were the ones who used that symbolic key to throw open the doors of the Our Lady of the Presentation School yesterday afternoon, as they stampeded down the dormant corridors and into their old classrooms, like impish revolutionaries laying claim to the czar's palace.

For indeed, the old beloved school belongs to them now - or to be more precise, to their parents, their parents' neighbors and a handful of generous corporate donors who managed to pull off a classic piece of neighborhood preservation against all odds.

At 2:15 yesterday afternoon, the Presentation School Foundation Inc. took control of a building deeply rooted in the collective heart and mind of Brighton.

So deep, in fact, that one year before their children were locked out of the school, parents and Presentation school alumni - some of whom grew up to be state reps and city councilors and the secretary of state - vowed that the old brick schoolhouse would never be recycled into condos, or a halfway house for fallen priests.

"You need neighborhood," said Harry Nesdekidis, with all the pride of a man who just celebrated his 37th anniversary of the day he arrived on these shores from Greece. Harry operates a garage across the street from the Brighton District Court and though his own two children have long since left the school, he was not shy about soliciting donations to purchase the building from just about every customer who rolled in for a tune-up or some bodywork.

Yes, those good neighbors at New Balance with the deep pockets and generous hearts may have ponied up \$350,000 to help seal the deal, but it was literally hundreds and hundreds of working people like Harry Nesdekidis who gave what they could afford in money and time and allowed those children to run back into the building.

The carved wooden sign on the grassy slope outside the front door reads "Our Lady of The Presentation School . . . Grades pre-K-6," just as it did on that morning when the archdiocese locked the doors and barred the children from returning to get their things.

But in its second life, the building that anchors one corner of Oak Square will be resurrected not as a school, but rather as a community center that will offer a multitude of services to children and adults.

Kevin Carragee, who helped direct this amazing effort, looked wistfully at the sign during yesterday's celebration. "We haven't decided what to do with it yet. But then, maybe it's just perfect as it is. Truth is, this building will always be the Presentation School."

The afternoon may have been gray and raw, but to Jennifer Doyle, president of the Presentation School Foundation, and the 200 neighbors and children who gathered under balloons and a reception tent, the day couldn't have been more glorious.

Nancy DeRosa's two little girls, Colleen and Allison, were among those who were exiled to the small island of grass and trees in the middle of Oak Square when the doors closed two years ago. They returned yesterday with a kind of Christmas morning anticipation.

"It wasn't just that I happened to have children there," said Nancy DeRosa, a nursing instructor at Massachusetts General Hospital. "The school was much more than that. It was the centerpiece of a community."

No, the old brick building won't be a school again, DeRosa conceded. But she knows its doors are no longer closed to the daughters who will continue to be nurtured there.

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