

Founder's Vision

Saint George's was "born" in Fred Gilbert's living room 50 years ago, but that's just the beginning !



Fred Gilbert at a Davenport House reception this summer for the school's founders and pioneers

When sixteen Spokane parents gathered in Fred Gilbert's home in February 1955, the topic of discussion was their children's education. Unhappy with the public schools' offerings for college-bound students, this determined group decided to start a school of their own.

"You could say that dissatisfied mothers were the primary influence on founding Saint George's School," comments Gilbert, who reminisced about the early years of the school at a lunch for some of the early faculty, students and supporters at the Davenport House this summer.

As the only lawyer among the founders, Gilbert drew up the incorporation documents for a school without a building. "It was foolish to start with no building," says Gilbert, but Ellen Bungay solved that problem. "She found the Davenport's Flowerfield Estate and made a down payment on the \$120,000 property, and the group assumed the rest of the cost," remembers Gilbert.

After learning that leaders at Spokane's Episcopal Cathedral wanted to start a school as well, the two groups came together and made Canon Doug Smith the school's first headmaster. "His bishop suggested Saint George's – the patron saint of England – as a name for the school, since it sounded established," says Gilbert. "Once we had the name, the dragon was the obvious mascot."

St. George's Episcopal School opened its doors in the fall of 1955 with 45 students in grades 7, 8 and 9. Two years later the school was renamed Saint George's School, setting its course as an independent private institution that soon grew to include students up through twelfth grade.

"As a college prep school, we looked for students with good academic backgrounds," says Gilbert, "and those students got a lot of

special attention in very small, personalized classes."

The original campus included the Davenport House, several greenhouses, two garages (one used for music, the other as a science laboratory), "and a milking barn complete with dirt floor, stalls and a hay loft." Gilbert remembers most of the early classes being held in that barn, even before a new concrete floor was poured in the school's third year.

Right from the start, the school offered its students very small classes and plenty of special attention from the five teachers Headmaster Smith had hired. Smith, however, parted ways with the school in the first few weeks over whether to make it a residential boarding school ("He wanted it that way; the board said no."). Sandy Lehman, the new English teacher, filled in as headmaster until Robert Metters arrived in 1957 to lead the school through a decade of steady leadership and improved finances.

"Money was tight at first," remembers Gilbert. "At one board meeting we were told that the school didn't have enough money to pay the teachers' salaries at the end of the week. We had to literally pass around a hat for the board members to put slips of paper into with pledges of money." When the treasurer reported they were still short, the hat was passed around again until the pledges covered the need.

During Gilbert's years on the board of trustees (several of them as president), he helped put the school's finances on a stable footing and build a new gym and classes for the Upper School. Now enjoying retirement in California, Gilbert still has a warm place in his heart for the school he helped establish.

"To see all the success the school has had is just wonderful. I'm very proud of Saint George's."