

My Life at Annunciation

By David Lowe
(Son of Rector the Rev. Gerald Lowe)

David Lowe, the son of Annunciation's first Rector, is an active member of this parish today. He and his wife head the Sunday school, and their daughter is now an acolyte. David gave the following talk as the parish celebrated Annunciation Day, March 25, 2013. In the paragraph below, he refers to himself as a tumor—as his mother believed that was what he was when she first was pregnant, long after her other children were born.

So here I am, "the tumor." No doubt my parents were glad to see that I was not a tumor. I was only recently reminded through the daughter of one of my elementary school teachers, that here on the island I was referred to as "Mrs. Lowe's miracle baby."

By the time I came along, my oldest sister, Audrey who is 20 years older than I am, had gone to nursing college in Miami and married. She is the only sibling not married here at Annunciation. Imagine my parent's surprise to learn that she had eloped with a Jewish Orthopedic Surgeon. So the family as I knew it, consisted of Mum, Dad, my two older sisters, Geraldine (who I called Booty because I thought she was sooo beautiful) and Angelica, and me—the tumor. Some of my fondest memories on the island are of the family taking walks on the beach after dinner; or listening to our parents' and their regular visitors' conversation late at night downstairs as they were enjoying cocktails—usually after choir practice or during the holidays. I remember the curious anxiety of my first days at school at Anna Maria Elementary, just a short walk away, riding my bicycle everywhere, surfing, and hanging out at Duffy's Tavern with my Dad to collect our Sunday dinner, Dad with his draft and me with my Coke. It was tradition that Mum prepared a festive dinner after church, so Sunday night was Dad's responsibility, typically burgers or Cuban sandwiches.

It may interest you to know that the sanctuary was arranged differently then. The choir was up front in the pews facing the aisle along with the organ. The interior of the sanctuary was raw concrete block and was only painted in the 1970's. The altar area was painted first, which is why there is a vertical wood trim on the wall at the altar rail. My mother was particularly bothered by the words *Cast-Crete* stamped in red on the raw concrete lintels over the doorways. The altar was up against the back wall so that my dad faced away from the congregation during the Eucharist. A small skylight allowed a warm glow from above. Dad was a traditionalist, and mass was typically Rite I. The joke was "Father Lowe's high church. Definitely smells and bells at special holidays. For his 40th anniversary in the priesthood, the Vestry with Tom

Stewart as Senior Warden took up a collection and sent Mum and Dad to England to celebrate and to get the right rite. While Dad was up front, Mum sat in the way back at the 8 am service. My sisters sang in the choir, and I was an altar boy, as you might expect. My introduction to serving as an acolyte was to be the "boat boy" providing the incense for the thurifer on Christmas Eve. It was especially exciting to be up late for Midnight Mass! We had two services during the season and one over the summer.

The Rector's study was the part of the sacristy where the vestments are stored today. The door to Second Avenue was the formal entry for anyone paying a visit. Dad did all the clerical work for the church, including typing up the bulletins. We helped fold them when they came back from the Island Printer. He was not master of his manual Smith Corona. You could always recognize his typing, as it was never level, and mistakes were almost always slipping past him. He typed up all his sermons ahead of time. They were kept in small three-ring binders, some of which was still in the family today. My sister Booty's husband (who found the church and is now a Deacon) has them in his possession at present. Dad's favorite hymn was "Amazing Grace" especially when sung by choir member Carole Griffin.

My sister Angelica would use Dad's study for homework at night. The porch lighting was controlled from both the Rectory and the Study. My favorite trick was to turn the light off while she was halfway down that long dark porch. I had a special play space at the Rectory end of the porch. It was a wood lattice barrier with a gate that also provided a bit of a privacy buffer. Sometimes Dad would barbeque there.

Two of the biggest events of the church year were of course, the Holly Berry Bazaar and the White Elephant Sale, which my mother spent the entire year making things for. She made dolls and knitted things, but her specialty was her calomondin and Kumquat marmalade. She also made sea grape jelly. Dad made his famous *Vicar's Bread* (he was featured in Look Magazine with his bread) and stuffed the freezers full of it for the sales. I was privileged. People lined up outside the doors, much as they do now. We also had pancake suppers, and at one time we had a substantial Sunday School which allowed for church picnics at the beach.

Lent was always special, although as I kid I didn't get what all the fuss was about. The ECW made palm crosses for Palm Sunday. On Ash Wednesday they burned the previous year's palm crosses to make the ashes. I got a free pass home from school for this event too. The garden came to life with the addition of colorful flowers, and the Sunday School kids received fresh lilies.

But we mustn't forget Christmas. Being the traditionalists that they were, Mum and Dad refused to put up our Christmas tree until Christmas Eve. My friend thought we were tortured, but I felt special because we had three trees: two for the sanctuary and one for the Rectory. This more than made up for the delay. For me, Christmas was always the best day of all, with parishioners dropping by bringing gifts or visiting for Christmas cheer. Mum and my sisters would decorate the tree and bake in the kitchen. Parishioners would be decorating the church with fresh wreaths and candles. The whole place was buzzing. The twelve days of Christmas were religiously observed in our house.

We originally lived in only a small portion of this parish hall. The existing rectory was built during the first year or so of my life. I'm told my favorite pastime as an infant was to watch the construction workers from my stroller in the garden. The rectory had terrazzo floors and the doors had jalousie windows. On the beach in SW Florida, these features let you know when it was winter. We had no air conditioning back then, except for a wall unit in my parents' bedroom. We spent most of our time upstairs in the family room—mom ironing, reading, or doing crossword puzzles, and Dad watching sports. I usually lay on the floor to escape the dense cloud of cigarette smoke that filled the air, as both Mum and Dad smoked like chimneys. Mum constantly fought with the sand that would make its way into our house from the beach. She was a stay-at-home mom, but always busy with ECW or volunteer work. She was a passionate gardener, amazed at how things grow here in Florida. A wonderful cook, she grew a lot of our vegetables and made most everything from scratch.

The addition to the parish hall was done in the late 1980's, and the church garden was not as it is now. There were no covered walks. The arbors and mosaic tiled St Dorothea and altar were created by the Pritchards and added around 1980. Even the parking lot was smaller and the driveway made a fantastic circuit, perfect for me to learn how to drive on. When I got old enough, I did all the mowing, for which I was paid \$1.25 a week.

I should tell you that Mum never did learn to drive. My Dad had tried to teach her when they were dating, but it was soon decided that he should do all the driving. When my sister Angelica convinced her to try again in the 1970's, Mum made a bit of a mess of it. She and Angelica got to laughing so hard that she totaled the Harrison's trash cans. So Dad did most of the driving with us kids filling in as soon as we were old enough.

The island was quite primitive back then, by today's standards. Gulf Drive was the only paved road; all the others were shell. Water was supplied by wells, and the grass was always greener over the septic tank. The concrete bridges to the island that we have today had just been built. In 1957 my

sister Audrey, as Manatee High School's Homecoming Queen, was perched upon an elephant (courtesy of Ringling Brothers Circus) for the opening ceremonial parade across the new bridge to Cortez.

There were not one but two pharmacies! Not one franchise. No Walgreens. But Webb's Island Pharmacy was the best, as we had a charge account there. I have great memories of the lunch counter, especially the Coke Floats. Although primitive, we had everything we needed here in Holmes Beach. Businesses catered to the whole community as opposed to catering to the tourists. Within a short bicycle ride I could visit the island bakery, hardware, grocery, and hobby stores. I remember that Merchant's Market (just in Bradenton Beach) had sawdust on the floor of the meat department. Through most of the 1960's Holmes Beach had no post office and to get the church's and our mail meant a daily car ride to Anna Maria. Our box, number 978, was a really big box and Dad would wait patiently while I dialed the combination.

Anna Maria Island was one big playground for us kids. About 50% was undeveloped woodland that offered us endless hours of exploration. My friends and I climbed trees, built forts, and blazed trails. Much of the bay-side of the island was accessible as well as all the beaches. The City pier, Rod and Reel pier, various marinas and bait shops, were all sources of amusement for us island kids. We had an air strip where private planes came and went almost daily. We even had an air show once. My fifth grade teacher, Mr. McDonald, has a Cessna and took my friend and me up for a ride one day; but in my excitement, I forgot to ask my parents if I could go. Boy was I in trouble.

The island was home to many notable characters, many of them artists or other creative types. The immediate neighborhood was diverse, if not downright eclectic. Immediately across the street to our north lived Paula and Pierre. On summer afternoons, my folks would go over for cocktail hour while we kids swam in their pool. Pierre was a tinkerer and had a great tool shed. The most enduring memory I have is of Pierre's running battle with raccoons. We could see their trash cans on garbage day from our kitchen window. Pierre's ultimate weapon of choice was electricity. Then, one morning my dad was in the kitchen brewing up coffee when he looked out the window, he saw the garbage man pick up one of the cans. The poor man began jumping up and down, screaming. Apparently Pierre had neglected to turn off his electric raccoon zapper.

Earlier I mentioned the Pritchard family and Carole Griffin. There are many other parishioners and important figures from our time as a family on the island and at Annunciation. Tom and Pam Stewart, organist Lou Jacobson who wrote the theme to the Marlboro Cigarette commercial. I marveled at

the gold record on his wall. One in particular who made a lasting impression on me was Aldis Brown. "Aldie" as he preferred, was a retired artist who lived on Bay Boulevard in Anna Maria. He painted wonderful watercolors and produced great sketches. A permanent fixture here at the church, he always helped the Altar Guild and adopted the self title "Sanctuary rat" (as in church mouse). He was very short in stature, hence the rodent metaphor. He served as acolyte at the 8 am service.

Well my sisters and I grew up. Geraldine and Angelica married and moved away. Dad retired in 1976 after 21 years as rector, and the three of us moved into Bradenton. Dad pulled supply duty for St George's for several years and occasionally filled in for vacationing priests.

I think Mum and Dad (Marge and GK) really loved it here on the island. They probably thought it was early retirement until the Tumor arrived. What a great chapter to add to their previous experiences. I believe that in all their travels, from Canada to South America to New York to Florida, they had finally found their home. So much of our lives are wrapped up in this church. Three of us kids were married here. And Mum, Dad, and Robin are all interred in the Garden here. All this and much more makes this place—this church—our home.