

THE SCHOOL

Sharing the Gospel

"The heart of the school is sharing the gospel. That's what it was created to do." John Higginbotham sits in his cramped office and tells how Cornerstone Christian School has grown from a handful of toddlers to an enrollment of 50 kids ages 3-10, pre-school through fifth grade.

He makes no excuse for the fact that they teach a literal interpretation of the Bible. "To make sure those

that they are going to have to reconcile with what's taught to them elsewhere." His own son, John David enters Grymes this September.

Cornerstone's curriculum is based on the A Beka Book developed by Pensacola Christian College.

"Thousands of Christian schools across the world are using it," says John. "It focuses on habits and habits training. It focuses on repetition and drill, drill drill in the young ages...The children in pre-school; they learn a Bible verse for each letter of the alphabet."

And, quite incredibly, the kids start learning their ABC's when they're three years old! "By kindergarten they're taking readers home and have reading homework. And they learn cursive writing in kindergarten. Yes, it's very accelerated."

Take five-year-olds, for example. "If you pay attention to how they draw, they draw

more in circles and curves and things like that. Very rare do you see them draw a right angle. So, it's more natural for them to learn to write cursive, once they catch onto it, than it is to write print or stick and ball."

He claims, "I wasn't a believer at first. I went down to Pensacola for more training in the curriculum, having to make the decision 'do we teach cursive in kindergarten, or is this crazy?' I went down thinking it's crazy." He shakes his head in wonderment. "By the time they're in first grade, I have to say that their cursive writing is better than mine. It's beau-



Although they don't have a flag pole yet, Cornerstone kids still gather outside for a "See You At the Pole" prayer circle.

tiful."

The average class size at Cornerstone is eight to 10 kids. The school currently has six core instructors plus a Spanish teacher and an art teacher. They have a brand new playground and P.E. twice a week. They pray together every morning and Thursdays everyone attends chapel in the Good Hope sanctuary.

months. Financial aid is available, and, needless to say, they're always looking for more money. This coming school year, something new for Orange County students: before-and-after-school care at Grace Community Church on Perry Plaza; and transportation to and from Good Hope by the TOOT bus at 8:30 and 3:30!

Cornerstone has also had to battle the stigma of "an elite private school." Back a half century ago, some Christian schools were formed for the decidedly un-Christian purpose of avoiding desegregation. "Well, of course that's not the heart of where our school came from," says John. "But it's interesting that I battle that perception on some level. There are people who are 50, 60 years old who detest private schools because of that experience."

But this is not so much a private school as it is a Christian one. "Christian is in our name," smiles John. "So, you don't have anybody thinking well are you a Christian school or not? We say, 'this is what we're doing. Pay for it if you like it; and if not, we're sure you won't come.'"



Teacher, Jennifer Quaintance provides individual attention for Aidin Farnsworth. Three year olds at Cornerstone are starting to learn their ABC's. By age five, they are reading and writing.

children, that God brings here, know right from wrong and know their Bible and know the Word and the biblical principals and learn how to live their lives for God the right way."

They have temporarily curbed their expansion at fifth grade, because they simply do not have any more room. But that pause also avoids wrangling with some pesky issues. "Here, we teach that the Bible is true. So, we don't believe in evolution as far as how the world was created," says John flatly. "We believe the story that's in the Bible from Genesis. And so the children learn that from pre-school all the way up through fifth grade. And, of course, they're going to have that foundation



John Higginbotham explains that children at Cornerstone learn how to write cursive because drawing circles and curves is more natural than printing out letters.

The also participate in the annual See You at the Pole event "to pray for our leaders, to pray for our country, to pray for the world."

Tuition is \$3,500 per year. Parents can pay \$350 a month for 10

THE MISSION

Hurdles and Miracles

John Higginbotham has a disarming smile. It's almost childlike in its purity; you might say radiant, which, considering that this conversation is happening in a cramped church office in Radiant, VA, seems more than a coincidence.

Even the fact that this church is named Good Hope; that it stands at a crossroads (the cross, a Christian symbol) with an awe-inspiring view of the Blue Ridge Mountains, is prophetic. John is brimming with good hope. His mission: to build and grow the Cornerstone Christian School, which is standing at a crossroads of its own. He beams that radiant smile.

This is not the first crossroads, nor the last that John Higginbotham has or will face. There was one back in 1998 that we'll talk about later. There was another one about seven years ago when John was working his way up the corporate ladder with a professional staffing company in Richmond. He had the nice house; the nice car.

But something was missing. "I wasn't living for the Lord. I was living for John," he says simply. "I had gotten caught up in the world and making money and my version of what success was and the Lord's version were very different. And so He used some circumstances to get my attention."

John speaks of his revelation and his decision to spend the rest of his life serving God in honest and earnest terms. He does not proselytize nor attempt to convert. He does not rant like some beyond-the-fringe televangelist. He just tells the story.

He produces a faded photograph. It shows his grandfather giving him his first Bible as a Christmas present. He carries that Bible with him to this day. He describes being raised in a Christian environment, being baptized and going to church every Sunday. And he describes how he strayed. He remembers asking himself. "Why wasn't I close anymore? What had happened to this?" he references his connection to God. "And what I wanted was that relationship back more than anything else. And I wanted to talk to God and not feel like my prayers were hitting the ceiling."

He determined that alcohol was the problem. "That's not to say that if you drink alcohol, it's a sin; that's not the message," he is quick to say. "Alcohol was not playing a role in my daily life. I wasn't going out after work. I felt like I was over that. That was college." He pauses to make his point. "But the sin had never been repented. I never said I was sorry."



Above, with the Bible his grandfather gave him in his hands, John Higginbotham finds himself literally and figuratively at a crossroads regarding the Christian school he and his wife Tracey founded in 2003. Below, Jasmine Weakley, Kathleen McGhee (partially obscured), Jasmine Saunders (back right) and Makayla Hayes all know the answer at Cornerstone Christian School. Bible study is an integral part of the curriculum.



And so John Higginbotham said he was sorry and came home both literally and figuratively, like the prodigal son. His wife, Tracy, a pre-school teacher, was helping her sister with a Christian pre-school in Madison. Their four-year-old son, John David was enrolled. And so John Higginbotham, with his fancy house and high-paying job in Richmond, moved back to the family farm in Orange to dedicate his life to serving God.

"My heart is for sharing the gospel with others," he says simply, adding he has no intention of going to divinity school to become a pastor. Instead he is focused on this school. And herein lies a tale of hurdles and miracles.

It started back in 2003 in spare rooms at Piedmont Episcopal Church in Madison. As they added a grade every year they soon outgrew that space. They moved to the Novum Baptist church on the Madison-Culpeper line. But, although the classrooms were built to educational standards, they couldn't expand because there wasn't enough acreage for a commercial well and drain field. So they had to move again. The abandoned Criglersville school building seemed ideal, but it didn't work out.

Right about then an angel whispered in John Higginbotham's ear, not one of those white apparitions with wings and a halo, but a real live flesh and blood one. Her name is

Joan Lohr, and she said, "'The Lord wants me to share something with you.' I said 'Okay,' and you don't forget it when someone says that. And she said, 'if you ever have any land problems or land concerns, call me.' I said, 'Okay, I will.'"

Good Hope Baptist Church, sitting there at the crossroads in Radiant, invited Cornerstone to join them. "Joan Lohr owned the farm next door." And it turned out they did have land problems, as in

Good Hope Church. "We built it together for both of us. So, they've been very generous."

They also had to bring the building up to educational code, with firewalls and handicap access etc. Everything "had to be installed and signed off on. And it was 4:55 the day before school started that I got approval that we could have school. It came down to the absolute wire, and I spent every minute of every day working on it," says John wearily. Hurdles and miracles.

He tucks the Bible his grandfather gave him under his arm and we walk down the hill from Good Hope Baptist Church. He points to the existing building. "We've got this facility here, but we plan, in time as we expand; we will outgrow it." We cross the one-acre new drain field, which now serves nicely as an athletic field, stroll through a patch of woods, and look out over a meadow. "On top of this knoll, we feel is the right spot," points John as he describes dreams of a new school building, one that could house all eight elementary grades.

But he cautions, "We've got a lot of planning to do...This is just a vision...We've got a lot of money to raise. The Lord could provide one person to make all the difference, but also it could take diligence and a lot of donations. I would like to see it happen in the next three or four years."

Plenty of hurdles and miracles at a school named Cornerstone at a church named Good Hope at a crossroads in a place called Radiant. "We've overcome some major hurdles that I believe have been acts of God."



Page Higginbotham gives a Bible to his grandson, John, on Christmas Day years ago.

nowhere to locate a drain field. They even had to spend one school year using a "pump and haul," sewage system, where the effluent was pumped into tanks across Beautiful Run Road, and hauled away.

Joan Lohr conveyed 20 acres of her adjoining land to the church school. They raised \$100,000 and engineered and built a drain field "that would take us up to over 100 students and beyond." John Higginbotham is quick to credit



The Higginbotham family- John David, 10 standing with his mom and Dad, Tracy and John, holding Lilly, 6, and Willow, 3.



On top of this knoll, we feel is the right spot," says John Higginbotham of plans to erect a new school building at Cornerstone. Those plans are still in the "vision" stages.

THE ACCIDENT

"I'm not alright, but I'm tough"

There's a joke that goes something like this: Flood waters are rising around a man's house. The fire department sends a four wheel-drive truck to rescue him, but he turns it down, convinced that "the Lord will save me."

The waters rise and the man escapes to a balcony on the second story. The fire department sends a motor launch to pick him up. Still he refuses the ride. "The Lord shall deliver me to safety," he exclaims.

Finally the waters lap at the roof line. The man is clinging to the chimney. They send a helicopter to pluck him from the roof, but he waves it away, still certain that God will miraculously deliver him to dry ground.

The next thing he knows he's at the pearly gates. Somewhat miffed that his faith did not save him from death, he asks, "Why didn't you rescue me, Lord?"

And a deep booming voice replies, "I sent a truck, a boat, and a helicopter. What more did you want?"

John Higginbotham accepted the helicopter ride. But he almost didn't.

"I don't have all of those facts. I remember bits and pieces," he says of the August 1998 accident in Raleigh, NC. It was night time. He was walking. A drunk driver ran over him and dragged him some 20 feet before coming to a halt. "Before then, I lived life as though I were invincible. I kind of liked to be in the fast lane and really didn't give eternity much of a thought because I was young, and I guess that's just part of being young. There I was, 22 years old, and came closer than even I can imag-

ine to meeting my heavenly father."

John was healthier than he is now. "I had the muffler of the car sitting there on my stomach, burning me." Hot fluids were dripping on him; the skin on his back was torn off. He still has the scars; he always will, but he suffered no broken bones; no internal injuries.

Still, he spent two and a half months at Wake Med Hospital, recovering from skin grafts on his stomach requiring 270 staples. The ladies in the mail room came up to see him. He was a celebrity. No one had ever received that many 'get well' cards before; 192 of them from churches, friends and family back home; so many cards, they plastered his hospital room like wallpaper. "I said, 'I just live in a small town and have really sweet grandparents and everybody's just loving on me and cheering me on.'"

The man who held his hand while he was trapped under the car came to visit and told him a story about that night. When he asked John if he was alright as he lay there, John replied, "I'm not alright, but I'm tough." Big laugh, because that's a pretty cocky answer when you're trapped under a car being barbecued by a muffler.

At this point, if Hollywood were telling this story, an apparition bathed in blinding white light would appear at John's bedside. And a booming voice would tell him, "John Higginbotham! Return

to my fold and build thee a school in my name."

But it didn't happen that way. John was not alright, but he was tough. He would gut this thing out. "I hadn't quite grasped that I wasn't as tough as I thought I was in that moment. I had a lot of learning to do. And the focus was on John for the next several years, like I was going to conquer my accident. I was going to prove that not only did I make it through; look at how I performed in the office, and look at how I got this promotion,



John Higginbotham attended and graduated from Woodberry Forest before going to college at Hampton Sydney.

and look at my house, and it was all John-focused." He beams that radiant smile again, adding, "And then the Lord brought me right back to it, and said, 'do you see this; how close you actually were? Are you that tough? Are you really that tough?'" John had to admit he wasn't.

"I've gotten to the point where I can say 'Thank you Lord for allowing my accident.' He pauses a beat.

"Now think of everything I went through and how hard that would be to say. It took me years to be able to say, 'thank you for getting my life on track and I'm sorry it took so much, but it did and I'm different for it. The guy who thought he was so tough under there was not about to thank God for allowing this to happen. He grew me through it.'"

Calling the accident a "reference point," he continues "You're going to die. Are you ready? Because I've been that close. And you don't know how many times you've been that close either." He recites his favorite quote from John Henry Newman, a 19th century priest. "Life is short, death is certain and the world to come is everlasting."