

Grace Lutheran School

7300 Division Street

River Forest, Illinois 60305

708-366-6900

alumni@graceriverforest.org

www.graceriverforest.org

*“Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received.”*

**I Peter 4:10** NRSV

## Been there, done it all

**A celebration of the career of Lyle Mortensen at Grace School on the occasion of his retirement**

by Bill Pullin

Is there anything that Lyle Mortensen didn't teach, coach, or manage during the many years he has worked at Grace School? Fifth grade, seventh and eighth grade, volleyball, wrestling, basketball, woodworking, ballroom dancing, driving the school bus, creating the yearbook, computers, audio-visual technology, directing musicals, leading field trips ... the list goes on and on. Lyle's long history at Grace both as a student and as a teacher has made it possible for him to do so much, so well, over so many years.

In the beginning, it was the family dentist who gave his parents the advice that they should “send Lyle to Grace School” for the first grade. Dr. Bob Juel was a friend of the family at United Lutheran Church in Oak Park, where, like all good Norwegians, families cared about the education and upbringing of their children. Grace School would be a bit of a trip, since the family business was a bar and restaurant at the corner of Grand and Narragansett in Chicago, but Mom and Dad Mortensen wanted the best for Lyle and took Dr. Juel's advice.

Lyle was aware that not all of his classmates at Grace were the children of bartenders. Some of



**Under the influence of Jerry Koenig and Paul Bouman ... Lyle came to see that teaching was a career full of fun and blessing.**

them were the children of lawyers or professors or doctors. But that mix of cultures is something that has always helped the Grace community work its

magic. Lyle's first grade teacher, Morella Mensing, was by no means a “coddler,” but neither was she impatient or uncaring. In gratitude for driving Lyle home on occasions when his parents could not leave work, she might be given a bottle from the shelf behind the bar. They appreciated her for going above and beyond what a teacher might reasonably be expected to do for a child.

**Mortensen, continued on page 3**

# Explaining the Unexplainable

Teacher Lisa Wolfanger helps Grace eighth-graders understand the 'huge and shattering' history of the Holocaust.

by Matt Dominis

Since 2004, Grace eighth-grade history and language-arts teacher Lisa Wolfanger has had the daunting but important job of teaching one of the darkest parts of history: the Nazi Holocaust against Jewish people in Europe.

It's no easy task: "You want to make something that's almost incomprehensible to be comprehensible to a 12-year-old."

At Grace, students learn about the Holocaust in eighth grade as part of a two-year American history cycle. The state requires that it be taught, but it's also recognized as a watershed event, critical to understanding modern history. "You can't not teach it," Lisa observes.

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## A M A Z I N G GRACE

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Grace Lutheran School  
7300 W. Division Street  
River Forest, IL 60305-1499  
Phone: 708-366-6900  
Website: [www.graceriverforest.org](http://www.graceriverforest.org)  
Email: [alumni@graceriverforest.org](mailto:alumni@graceriverforest.org)

Principal: Bill Koehne  
Editor: Gwen Gotsch  
Designer: Kathryn (Hillert) Brewer '76  
Contributing Writers:  
Bill Pullin  
Matt Dominis  
Gwen Gotsch



**Eighth graders Steven Morales and Anthony Battaglia listen to survivor testimony online as part of their study of the Holocaust. Students complete a "3-2-1" response for each testimony: 3 facts, 2 questions and 1 feeling.**

Lisa first started teaching the subject in 1983 when she was a teacher in public schools in Pittsburgh and western New York. She has taught the Holocaust to upper elementary and junior high school classes almost every year since. Along with her decades of experience teaching it, in 2002 she participated in a week-long fellowship at the National Holocaust Museum in Washington, DC.

Eighth-grade students come into Lisa's class knowing the basics about the Holocaust – what the concentration camps were, and that millions of Jewish people were killed – but that's all.

Lisa won't sugarcoat the subject and doesn't want to see it trivialized. Teaching a history this "huge and shattering" requires breaking the subject down as much as possible into smaller parts. For example, she'll explain the different groups of people involved in the tragedy and describe the discrete steps that allowed it to happen.

*"The Jewish population of Europe was a wide and varied people. If all we have are grainy images of Jews being marched to their death, then we're doing a disservice."*

### Bystanders and Upstanders

Most are familiar with the perpetrators and victims of the Holocaust, but Lisa also discusses the role of bystanders and upstanders. Bystanders are people who knew about the persecution and murder of Jews and other groups but did nothing, ultimately affirming what the perpetrators did. Upstanders are individuals (or nations) that tried to stop or prevent the atrocities.

"The Jewish population of Europe was a wide and varied people," Lisa says, and there were Jewish people who resisted the Holocaust, some loudly, some quietly. "If all we have are grainy images of Jews being marched to their death, then we're doing a disservice."

It isn't always easy to be an upstander, Lisa says: "It feels better to be in the 'in group' than the 'out group.' It feels better to be in the 'in group' that's doing the excluding than the group that is being excluded."

The Holocaust didn't happen suddenly. "It happened step by step, it happened incrementally," Lisa says. "There are choices that are being made at each increment, by the perpetrators, the victims and the bystanders."

**Holocaust**, continued on page 4

**Mortensen, continued from page 1**

Later in his years as a Grace student, Lyle came under the influence of Jerry Koenig and Paul Bouman. These two were role models, and through them Lyle came to see that teaching was a career full of fun and blessing. History, language arts, religion, music, geography, physical education — Lyle's experience as a student at Grace gave him a rich foundation for exploring life, discovering personal aptitudes, and learning to appreciate the thoughts and feelings of others. He tells the story of how he and his peers once played a game of "throwing the chalk erasers at each other" in an office where Mr. Koenig's clean sport coat was hanging over a chair — sadly, as it turned out, in the line of fire. Jerry's calm, reasonable rebuke served as a memorable example of how to manage a student's misbehavior, a task Lyle has been called upon to do on more than one occasion since then.

Lyle came to understand and appreciate that a foundation for life-long values is laid in grade school, a foundation that at Grace includes spirituality, dedication to service, willingness to take responsibility, and a freedom to explore that comes out of the knowledge that someone — your teacher — will be there to pick you up if you make a mistake. With this in mind, he returned to Grace School as a teacher after graduating from Walther Lutheran High School and Concordia College. He was welcomed and respected as a peer by his former teachers Mr. Koenig and Mr. Bouman, two of the many teachers at Grace School whose careers have spanned several decades. At one point Mr. Bouman made a friend for life out of Lyle by saying to the young teacher, "I like that you call me Paul." On another occasion, when Lyle was tricked into entering a classroom decorated for a surprise birthday party celebration, Paul Bouman played "Send in the Clowns" on the piano to the giggles and delight of the students.



At Grace School, says Lyle, teachers and students are able to show their human sides to each other, to learn new things together, and to have fun doing the same things, whether taking a hike at Camp Sagawau, putting on an operetta, or going on a field trip to Milwaukee or to German Town in Chicago. Lyle drove the bus on these particular field trips, led by Grace German teacher "Frau" Carol Ewald, who had once been Lyle's teacher at Walther. "Be thankful," he says, "that your GPS doesn't have the many last-minute crazy ideas for side trips that Carol came up with."

Lyle moved from classroom teaching to being the Technology Administrator at Grace School in 2002. He had already been working with computers at the school for a long time. He has continued to serve both Grace Church and School managing IT support and video and audio resources and production. Since 2012 he has also served as assistant principal. Lyle retires officially at the end of August, after helping over the summer with the transition to new

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models of IT and audio-visual support. On Sunday, August 13, the Grace Church and School community will thank Lyle for his many years of service during the morning worship services.

What will he do in retirement? "I plan to do some things I've never done before and go some places I've never been before," he says.

Dedication, creativity, patience, empathy, energy, generosity, awareness: words that might have been on a seventh-grade spelling test back in Lyle's days as a student. During his life and career at Grace School he has been a living example of these qualities for several generations of Grace students.

Thank you, Mr. Mortensen.

**Holocaust, continued from page 2**

She begins by introducing some of the conditions that existed in Germany in the 1930s that made the Holocaust possible: the effects of anti-Semitism and the Great Depression in Europe, and the corruption of the German military tradition. She'll explain how the Nazis rose to power and how Hitler's propaganda helped many Germans to dehumanize and scapegoat the Jewish community.

**Challenging and Disturbing History**

Eighth-graders can show tremendous maturity, but they are not yet adults, and these are challenging and often disturbing ideas to absorb, Lisa says. Each class is different, and there usually are one or two periods in which she sets aside the lesson plan and lets the students ask questions. "I do my best to let that happen."

Images are a powerful way to show the history, but Lisa uses them with care, limiting the number of images so as not to overwhelm. "It's not my desire to give them nightmares when they go home at night."

The National Holocaust Museum discourages teachers from using any fictionalized or dramatized images in lessons. Lisa mainly uses documentary photographs and shares the drawings of David Olere, an artist and inmate at Auschwitz whose drawings documented the horrors of life in the concentration camp.

Lisa helps the students to understand the pictures in a grown-up way. Every class can be a little different in its overall maturity level. "Sometimes I'll think, 'Not this picture for this group.'"

**Why teach the Holocaust?**

Learning about the Holocaust shows students the danger of discrimination and hatred, raises several complicated



**Evan Streufert-Wold and Ben Groll listen to Holocaust survivor testimony online. As they study the Holocaust, students learn about the danger of discrimination.**

*"There's a message of standing with the outsider – the person who is being excluded, victimized, or scape-goated. That's the person that Jesus tells us to stand with."*

moral lessons, and explores the problem when a population becomes silent or apathetic. Students have inevitable questions: Why did the Holocaust happen? Why didn't people stop it?

"There's an individual lesson about being an upstander," Lisa says. "There's a message of standing with the outsider – the person who is being excluded, victimized, or scape-goated. That's the person that Jesus tells us to stand with."

Lisa adds: "When enough individuals stand together, they're able to stand against something terrible."

Passing on the story of the Holocaust helps counter the claims of Holocaust deniers. The Holocaust also shows why a society's democratic institutions are important and worth protecting, Lisa says. But possibly the most important reason to teach the Holocaust is to ensure it does not happen again.

During the 2016 election season, Lisa saw some of her students deeply concerned about the bruising campaign rhetoric. Amid the debate over America's response to terrorism, the Muslim community in the U.S. and around the world faced suspicion and criticism, and

in some cases all Muslims were blamed for attacks on Americans.

And while Lisa wouldn't endorse or criticize any candidate or party, she maintained that it's important for a Christian school to teach about kindness, respect and tolerance of other religions – and the value of standing with the outsider.

**Evolving topic**

When Lisa first taught about the Holocaust in the 1980s, concentration camp survivors were coming forward and telling their stories publicly, many for the first time.

"Everyone wants to define their own history," Lisa says, and for many Holocaust survivors, coming forward publicly was a way to write their own story.

"In my lifetime there are people who have come out and told their story; museums are being built; memorials are being built," she said. "They're finding more information in Eastern Europe that shows more details about the Holocaust."

Now the number of survivors is dwindling, but their accounts have been recorded in memory projects. The story of the Holocaust continues to be told but, Lisa observes, the story itself is evolving.

"The history is really still being written."

# Support for all kinds of learners at Grace

by Gwen Gotsch

Grace School's Special Education Coordinator Kristine Washburn focuses on keeping kids' learning on track. That might mean working alongside classroom teachers during a reading or math lesson. It might mean working with a small group of students outside the regular classroom. It might mean helping a junior high student keep track of completed assignments by tying a neon shoelace around the tiny flash drive that inevitably works its way to the bottom of a messy backpack.

Describing her job, she says, "I get to know everybody and see their strengths as well as their weaknesses. It helps you see a student more as a whole person, and build a relationship with them."

Kristine works mainly with students in grades four through eight. Students in first through fourth grade who need extra help work with part-time staff member Julie Fleisch, a certified reading specialist.

"We do a super-hard push to get them reading in the early grades," says Kristine. One advantage of being in a parochial school such as Grace is that students can receive extra reading help without going through an elaborate evaluation process, as they would have to do in a public school.

"My biggest goal [with students in middle grades] is to keep them in the classroom," Kristine says, "so that they know what's going on in the curriculum. ... That's what's different about our kind of resource program. We're trying to support and modify for the kids so that they're in the classroom most of the time."

Often this means having two teachers in the same classroom for some subjects.

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Classroom teachers at Grace pay close attention to best practices for teaching, which includes modifying instruction in response to different learning styles and needs. Kristine and her classroom-teacher colleagues often work with small, mixed groups of students, some of whom need extra supports, some who work well independently.

"That way there's less of specific kids being picked out all the time, and everyone's okay with it. I really do work with almost every student in these classes."

Kristine's day includes teaching a small group of sixth grade math students outside the regular classroom. The subject calls for closer attention to their needs. "I can do more monitoring of their work in a pull-out group."

She also teaches specific study skills, especially in seventh and eighth grades, as students prepare for high school.

"Make a note card with the things that are important," she'll say. Firmly but cheerfully, she makes sure they follow through.

"We clean out lockers. We check binders. I could organize kids all day long. That repetition is important, so that by the time they get to high school they have these tools in place to help them. With enough buy-in from them, they'll get there. Once they see their test scores go up, it's very exciting to see them take their own initiative."

When it's necessary, Kristine helps teachers and parents work through the



*"It's very exciting to see them take their own initiative."*

process of getting a student's learning needs evaluated through the River Forest Public School District.

"What we're trying to do is find out how to help them." Often the evaluation provides Grace teachers with information that reinforces the strategies and services the school is already providing.

"We take really good care of our students needing a little extra support. I'm never going to lower my expectations, but we might tweak them and celebrate different things. One hundred percent is a goal for many students, but when kids are working their hardest and you know they've put in that effort, it's okay to celebrate a C. It's nice that they often have talents elsewhere, and Grace's sports and music programs give them other platforms on which to shine."

# Annual FUND

for Grace School

The Annual Fund for Grace School helps support the school's operating budget, making it possible for us to continue to serve a diverse student body. Your gift to the Annual Fund is an investment in our current students and in the future of Christian elementary education. Help us continue to prepare children for lives of discipleship through Christ-centered, academically excellent education.

**Give online at [gracriverforest.org](http://gracriverforest.org), or send your check to the Annual Fund for Grace School, 7300 Division Street, River Forest, IL 60305.**



## THANK YOU TO OUR DONORS

**Our heartfelt thanks go to these donors who made gifts to the Annual Fund for Grace School between December 9, 2016, and May 18, 2017.**

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## Eighth-grade class gift

In mid-May Grace School's graduating class worked with congregation member Sandy Lentz to plant a tree as their Class Gift. The scientific name for the new tree is *Amelanchier*, though it is often called a Juneberry tree because that's when it usually blooms. It is native to the eastern U. S. so it will thrive in its new setting outside the main church doors. Besides purchasing the tree, the eighth graders also made a gift to the Nature Conservancy, a conservation organization.



# CLASS NOTES

**1956** Dorothy Choitz Foster passed away on July 17, 2016.

**1958** Bill Kuhlman played a recital on the historic organ at St. Paul's Anglican church in Valparaiso, Chile. The organ was donated by Queen Victoria. Bill's mother passed away on October 31, 2016, at the age of 105.

**1962** The premiere of Hollis Thoms' one-act opera "And did the world with devils swarm, all gaping to devour us..." will take place at Christ Lutheran Church Inner Harbor, Baltimore, Maryland, on November 5, 2017.

## A Graceful Evening

**A Graceful Evening** was a huge success this year! The annual dinner-auction benefit for Grace School, held at the Oak Park Country Club on March 18, earned more than \$87,500 for the school, our largest total ever! This included \$30,000 for our fine arts program through the Fund-A-Need program.

Grace School's Alumni Award was presented to neurologist **Ryan Uitti** ('74) and musicians **Dena** ('86) and **Amir** ('91) **ElSaffar** at the event. Dr. Uitti is an international expert on Parkinson's disease and other movement disorders, with an active research career at Mayo Clinic in Jacksonville, Florida. Violinist Dena ElSaffar founded Salaam, a Middle Eastern music ensemble that combines Eastern and Western styles. Trumpeter, santur player, vocalist, and composer Amir ElSaffar is a master of diverse musical traditions, combining Middle Eastern musical languages with jazz and other styles of contemporary music.

**Grace School alums Miriam Clapp, Madeleine Koetke and Natalie Chizzo provided dinner music during A Graceful Evening. Dena ElSaffar and Ryan Uitti received Alumni Awards. Former Grace School secretary Marilyn Busse attended the event with daughter Jennifer Laabs ('75).**

# Grace Church and School CALENDAR

Friday, May 12, **JK-4 musical, "Oh, Jonah!"**  
9:15 a.m. and 7 p.m.

Saturday and Sunday, May 20 and 21, **LSA State Track Meet**

Friday, May 26, **Walk With Grace, All-School Walkathon**

Thursday, June 1, **Graduation, 7:30 p.m.**

Friday, June 2, **Closing Worship, 9 a.m.**

Friday-Saturday, June 9-10, **Youth Rummage Sale**

Monday-Friday, June 12-16, **Vacation Bible School**

June 19-30, **SCAMP** day camp for preschool and kindergartners

Tuesday, August 22, **First day of 2017-18 academic year**

Sunday, October 1, **Oktoberfest, 4-7 p.m.**

## High school choices

Each year Grace School graduates continue their education at a variety of public and private high schools. Students in the Class of 2017 will be attending these schools in the fall:

- East Leyden High School
- Elmwood Park High School
- Fenwick High School
- Guerin Prep High School
- Lane Tech High School
- Oak Park River Forest High School
- Riverside Brookfield High School
- St. Ignatius High School
- Trinity High School
- Waldorf High School
- Walther High School
- Whitney Young Magnet High School





On May 12 Grace students from junior kindergarten through fourth grade presented "Oh, Jonah! A Whale of a Tale." The cast included angels, Jonah's back-up squad, sailors, Ninevites, and a stage full of jellyfish, octopuses, and other creatures from under the sea. Thanks to generous donations to the Fund-A-Need at A Graceful Evening and donations to Grace Church, there were new wireless microphones and new stage platforms—a big boost to dramatic productions at Grace.

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& SCHOOL**  
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