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My Stint with the P-TA

Perhaps all parents of grade school children expect to experience some relationship with the Parent-Teachers Association. I was excited about the prospect of George entering school, but I had no intention of becoming a P-TA mom. I was a fan of Helen Hokinson's charming cartoons in *The New Yorker*, with their starchy-stiff matrons who had inane opinions on almost any subject, and Hokinson wasn't the only person poking fun at the P-TA. There were endless jokes about the stereotypical P-TA activities involving parents, especially mothers, in fruitless, time-consuming chores, answering the strident voice and irritating direction of the Hokinson "girls." I did not consider myself an organization person and could not imagine being involved with an association with such a poor public image. I acknowledged that the P-TA seemed to be a necessary adjunct of any school, particularly elementary schools: principals were alert for the need for its existence and to the need to keep its activities well monitored; parents of first graders were assured of the need to support the P-TA as a means of supporting their children. When the time to sign up for the P-TA came, I decided I really should make some kind of positive gesture toward the welfare of the school and my child. I joined but resolved to stay clear of busy work for dubious causes.

I willingly attended the first P-TA meeting after George started to school. In those waning days of the fifties, almost all of the mothers of the Dan D. Rogers Elementary School were full-time mothers; consequently, the P-TA was a Thursday morning affair attended by a large number of women. I knew a few of them. Almost immediately I found myself on a committee, resolving that this one would be the last. The purpose of the committee was to solicit cakes for a cake walk at the upcoming carnival, whose purpose was to provide a fun family evening at the school while raising money to install refrigerated water fountains in the school corridors. The cake walk was a perennial activity, an easy way to generate fun for fifteen to twenty people at a time while raising a good bit of money. Getting contributions of cakes was amazingly easy, and each cake generated about ten dollars revenue. The cake walk worked like musical chairs as people walked in a gradually diminishing circle designed to select the lucky survivor who won the cake. This was repeated until no more cakes were available, thus raising at least two hundred dollars, a real step toward our goal.



Of course, that was not the last committee I joined. A couple of years and a number of committees later I found myself nominated to be the program chair for the next year's P-TA. I'd enjoyed all my previous appointments, thus getting acquainted with a number of other mothers. So, I accepted the nomination. There was never more than one candidate for each P-TA job; I later had the urge to nominate someone from the floor just to see what would happen, but I never quite had the nerve. I spent the summer rounding up a varied collection of speakers and programs for the next academic year. Thanks to Robbie Lee Williams, a very helpful principal who became a really good friend, I enjoyed this job.

The next year George and Roland had a new school to attend, L.L. Hotchkiss Elementary School, just two blocks from our home. With Robbie Lee Williams' introduction to the Hotchkiss principal, I met the delightful Sarah Katherine Childers. At Sarah Katherine's invitation, I helped organize the Hotchkiss P-TA and was rewarded for my efforts with the offer of the presidency. I had serious doubts about being a P-TA president, but by then I was well indoctrinated in the need for such an organization and accepted. In the beginning the tasks were exhilarating. We decided to follow the lead of other P-TA's and meet at night so that fathers as well as mothers could participate. The Hotchkiss school district was limited by geographic boundaries which included two major thoroughfares on the west and south, the flood plain of White Rock Lake on the north, and the property of the Knights of Columbus on the east. We felt as though we were inventing Utopia with the quiet neighborhood, a state-of-the-art new school building, and a core of devoted parents, not to mention our above average children!

Then, we settled down into the reality of everyday living. I appointed a committee to persuade the city to clean up the flood plain adjacent to our neighborhood so that it could be used for play and picnics. We planned the inevitable carnival to raise money for niceties the school board did not provide, such as a curtain for the stage of our auditorium as well as black-out drapes for the windows to facilitate school-day movies. We established a parents' visitation evening so that all fathers and mothers could meet the teachers, especially our children's homeroom teachers. And so on, projecting through to the end of the year.

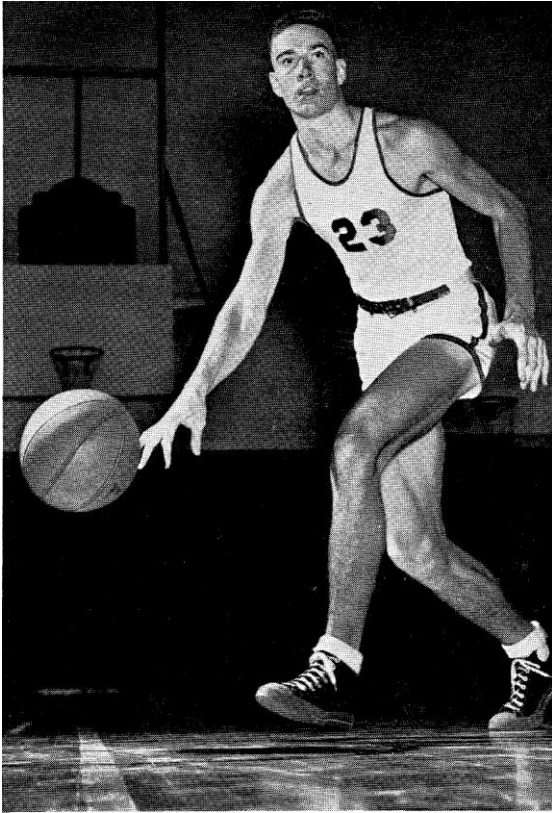
I had never presided over a meeting involving more than fifteen people and wasn't too sure about Robert's Rules of Order, even after studying the book. My first appointment was a parliamentarian, a young lawyer who was well versed in parliamentary procedure. Harold was both a help and a hindrance; he knew his procedure very well indeed, sometimes so well, in fact, that he brought our meetings to a virtual halt. But he was a great support when we ran into our first problem at the second meeting of the year. The city had cleared the underbrush in the park and had installed a number of picnic tables. Roland's first grade class marched down to the park for a picnic lunch, having a wonderful time. People whose homes backed up to the flood plain were delighted, for before the clearing, they had had to be alert to the occasional copperhead snake which escaped the plain into their backyards, particularly on the first warm days of spring. But this was also the beginning of the sixties when we were concerned about integration of

public spaces (integration of the schools was not yet a viable issue). A few parents, even a couple who had been pleased to have the copperhead menace eliminated, complained to the city that they did not want the park there because of the possibility of rowdy weekend parties. They were in reality afraid of integrated participation in the space. The city immediately ceased its clean up and removed the picnic tables and benches. The objection of just one citizen was sufficient, unless the P-TA wished to take on the project for itself. A floor fight was threatened for the next meeting. At a board meeting, we discussed the question, and Harold, the parliamentarian, promised to sit on the front row and bolster my attempts to keep order. Together we worked out a process for getting an orderly expression of the will of the organization, limiting debate to a reasonable length of time. I was very proud of the way we ran the meeting, although the dissenters prevailed, and I had to swallow my big disappointment about the improvement of the neighborhood.

That was the biggest but not the only strife of the year. The next one involved "My Weekly Reader," a graded publication the school subscribed to for the third, fourth, and fifth grades. One family who were active members of the John Birch Society objected to "My Weekly Reader" when their child brought home the publication with a picture of the United Nations headquarters on the front page. Because of the participation of the Soviet Union in the UN, these people feared that the newspaper "fostered a group who would destroy the unity of the American family." With the support of the principal whose jurisdiction, not ours, covered the use of the newspaper, the P-TA meeting suffered only minor disruption. The family had its say publicly and the meeting continued on with subjects which were our bailiwick.

When the New Math was introduced into the curriculum that year, there was much agitation because it was different from what the parents had been taught. The family who had objected to the UN joined other parents who fought the New Math because they saw it as a Russian plot to disrupt the unity of the family, giving as their reason that "we can't help our children with their homework"! Again, the P-TA served as an uneasy forum for the discussion of a curriculum matter which was not our province. The discussion was vehement, but each side had its say without in any way changing the decision of the school board. A few people were satisfied that the experiment was a good thing, but no one went home entirely frustrated. I decided that I would never look forward to presiding over a controversy but that I could survive one.

And so it went for the year. I learned a great deal about parliamentary procedure but even more about the way people behave. I was satisfied with the year, but it was with considerable relief that I turned my gavel over to Bill Gillespie, my successor. (Take that, Helen Hokinson. Bill was young, tall, slender, and not at all like any of the "girls.") I did continue to join and participate in P-TA work through the rest of the boys' public school days. It was, in actuality, the closest thing our neighborhood had to the open give-and-take of a town hall meeting, although limited (but not too closely) to school matters.



BILL GILLESPIE, Forward

