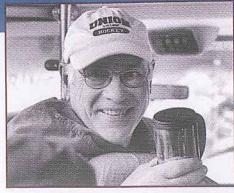


# The Many Lives of Gow School ~ by Rick Ohler



Reprinted from his column entitled *The View From Right Field* in The East Aurora Advertiser

We crackerjack journalists are trained to be observant and investigative, so we can spot certain. . . . wait a minute; I haven't been trained in journalism; I'm just winging this, making it up as I go along. As if you couldn't tell. Let me start again.

We part-time journalists get lucky every now and again. Occasionally we are in the right place at the right time, and some newsworthy (or column-worthy, at least) stuff falls in our laps. I had just that experience last week at the Right Field Satellite Office, southeast corner of Oakwood and Elm.

I was there to judge the First Annual Wallenwein's Chili Cookoff, won by long time townie Mary Rapalje Williams. Having adjourned to the bar, hydrating after the grueling (no pun intended) competition, I chanced to stand next to Dave "Doc" Slosson and Jeff Sweet, a teacher, coach and administrator at the Gow School. Doc's son Brian is a Gow alumnus from 2002, who went on to Mercyhurst College and now is a computer network supervisor in Southern California. So the talk soon turned to the world-renowned boarding school on Emery Road that has specialized in educating young men with dyslexia and related learning disabilities since 1926. As with many Govians, Brian Slosson had experienced difficulties reading as a young man and wasn't having a successful public high school experience. "I think it's fair to say," said Doc in no uncertain terms, "that Gow School saved my son's life."

Now that's a strong statement, one you might quarrel with, unless you had been with me the night before.

I had been invited by my pals Etzel and Fetzer (sounds like a German comedy team, but they are really two good friends who enjoy hunting) to their game dinner at the East Aurora Fish & Game Club. There, even we who do not take advantage of the Second Amendment were treated to venison and pheasant prepared in all kinds of ways—grilled, made into jambalaya, ground into sausage, sautéed, you name it. It was outstanding. Among the attendees

was Sammy Cosmano, who stars at, I mean, who owns the Aurora Car Wash on East Quaker by the plaza. Sammy, many of you will know, has managed to turn washing cars into performance art, and his establishment is one of the most popular places in the village. Over after-dinner bourbons on the rocks—a digestive aid—we discovered that Sammy, too, is a Gow School alumnus, class of '84. He told us that by eighth grade he was doing poorly in school and was on a bad path. "I was in trouble. My parents sent me to Gow School. It was tough, but it saved my life."

Now that's a strong statement, one you might quarrel with, unless you had been with me a few weeks before.

I was visiting with the Gow family on Emery Road, paying my respects after the death of David Gow, son of founder Peter Gow, Jr., former headmaster of the school and revered eminence grise after his retirement in 1990. As we chatted away, remembering David Gow, in walked Dean Jewett, alumnus from the late '50s, former board of trustees member and long time Gow advocate. He spoke of his years at Gow, how he had struggled with reading and all his studies and how David Gow had been tough on him, but had ultimately taught him not only reading but life lessons that he uses to this day in business. "Gow School saved my life," he said.

You get the idea.

The Gow School has been a part of my life for a long time. Peter Gow the younger and I have been friends most of our lives, and since both our fathers were educators, and both of us have been involved in education in one way or another, I appreciate their difficult mission. I've been lucky enough to have contracted for painting work on their expansive, gracious and meticulously-groomed campus over the last 30 years, so I can at least observe from a ladder what goes on there. But it's only in the last few years, under sixth headmaster Brad Rogers, that Gow has really become an integral part of the community.

When I was a teenager, Gow was very much a separate entity from the town. The hundred and fifty or so students

kept to themselves, coated and tied, very much the preppies, and rarely ventured into town. In fact, many villagers had little if any knowledge of the school's existence even as it continued to prepare young men from all over the world for college and their lives beyond. On Saturday nights in the 60s some of the students might board a bus and take in a movie at the Aurora Theatre, still in coats and ties, only to receive the taunts of locals, bent on displaying their provincialism and hopeless ignorance of reading disorders.

Not so today. Take two weeks ago for instance. Gow had invited Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Philip Schultz to speak to the 139-strong student body about his book *My Dyslexia*, a memoir of growing up dyslexic in a time period when the condition was poorly understood. Headmaster Rogers decided to invite the community at large to Schultz's talk, and I joined two dozen East Aurorans for the occasion. It was inspirational, to say the least, as he chronicled his experiences of being made to feel stupid because he couldn't read only to emerge eventually as a respected poet. After the talk, in the question and answer period, a guest whom I had invited (and who had never been to Gow even after living here several decades) asked a question about second languages and dyslexia. Immediately following the program two Gow students, one from the Dominican Republic and one from Niger, looking sharp in their blazers and ties, presented themselves before us and began to talk about their dyslexia. They spoke with understanding about the methods the faculty at Gow were employing to help them.

They didn't say that Gow had saved their lives, but I'm guessing that one day they will.

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**About Rick Ohler:** In addition to being a lifelong friend of The Gow School, Rick Ohler is a writing instructor, a writing workshop host and a freelance writer. He writes the *View From Right Field* column for The East Aurora Advertiser and *The Last Straw* column for the online weekly *Unweaving the Nest*. Find him on Facebook or at [www.rightfieldwritingworks.com](http://www.rightfieldwritingworks.com).