

A CATASTROPHE TURNED BLESSING

By Bob Sylva '68

On the morning of February 25, 2004 -- Ash Wednesday, to be exact -- the forces of nature paid a visit to Christian Brothers High School. Throughout the north state, 60 mph winds and thrashing rains ransacked the landscape, toppling trees, crushing houses, knocking down power lines, closing roads, causing havoc.

In the school gymnasium, the student choir was warming up for that morning's peaceful liturgy when someone remarked about "this racket on the roof!"

It wasn't Santa Claus. It was the heavens opening up.

In seconds, an 800-square-foot section of the gym's roof was suddenly competing in a gigantic discus event, shards and fragments, the accumulated Sistine ceiling of years of reverence and screaming, landing in the parking lot, in the athletic fields. What was left was daylight. A deluge of water playing on the parquet floor. How biblical.

As with just about everything connected with long-graced and eternally protected Christian Brothers High School, it was an act of God -- sudden, swift, mysterious.

But, ultimately, provident. A catastrophe turned blessing.

Oh, things were mopped up soon enough. You probably chuckled over that comical -- in hindsight -- news photo of Brother George Van Grieken, FSC strolling through "Lake CB" holding a blithe umbrella as maintenance chief Joe Guilherme and his loyal crew labored furiously to sponge, squeegee and pump the cascade of rainwater off the gym floor. But Christian Brothers High School, true to its character,

took this latest, sodden setback in stride. Repairs were made, campus life resumed.

Still, as Ash Wednesday reminds us all of our mortality, this unexpected event underscored a fault we here have known about for some time but have failed to rectify. The CB gym, built in 1956 is at the end of its life span. The structure, its decades of heroic service notwithstanding, is old, outmoded, a beaten warrior. It's a relic compared with the expansive athletic and performing arts centers being built today and falls woefully short of the unparalleled standards that Christian Brothers strives to achieve in all its campus facilities, as evidenced by its new Math, Science, and Technology wing.

Thus, responding to the gusty nudge from our Lord above, Christian Brothers High School is pleased to announce an exciting, unprecedented campaign to thoroughly upgrade and modernize the school gymnasium. Just a short list of improvements includes: air conditioning, a sound-dampening baffle for the ceiling, a concert-quality sound system, Broadway-worthy theatrical lighting, and completely renovated locker rooms, for both girls and boys, with new showers, fresh tilework, polished surfaces and sparkling-clean lavatories. Sounds, and smells, like heaven, no?

Better yet, the school is proud and pleased, if not tearful, to announce that the new complex will be named The Ron Limeberger Memorial Gymnasium.

Sadly, the Christian Brothers community lost its most devoted, most enthused supporter this year, a mighty passing that was a portent of the gym's unpeeling. On January 8, Ron Limberger died of a sudden heart attack. He was 69 years old. He leaves his wife of 46 years, Joan, twin sons, Mike and Mark, both CB graduates (Class of '76), daughter Jill Sackett, graduate of Bishop Manogue (Class of '79), plus eight grandchildren, including Melissa Limeberger (Class of 1997), Matthew Limeberger

(Class of 2001) and Amanda Limeberger, 16, a returning junior at CB.

Asked what it is like to be Ron Limeberger's granddaughter, Amanda says, "It's an honor. Whenever people find out who I am, there are always stories about him. Everyone always has lots of memories." She laughs. "Sometimes, they give me a hard time!" (One can only imagine the playful ribbing, the knowing nods of respect.) "But I'm proud to go to CB. It meant a lot to my grandfather."

No, Amanda, it meant everything.

Ron Limeberger was Mr. Christian Brothers. He graduated from the school (Class of '53), where he was student body president, an all-city basketball and baseball player. After Sacramento State College, he came back to CB. And never left. He taught for 42 years. He coached basketball and baseball, the latter sport for 31 years, compiling an incredible 431 wins. He taught endless classes of health, P.E., and driver's ed. How many students on the road today learned to drive from Mr. Limeberger?

Omnipresent, he seemed to live on campus. Upon his retirement in the spring of 2000, Mr. Limeberger -- crusty outside, cream filling inside; but not a man prone to wax philosophic -- in a farewell story, reflected: "A good teacher is a good coach. A good coach is a good teacher. Once you learn to teach, it just sort of flows with you. Each kid is individual. I figured up the other day I had about 16,000 students over the last 42 years. It's not only the ones you've touched but the ones who've touched you. When a student comes back later in life and says, 'Hey, thanks!' Then I've done my job."

What a job. What a legacy he left the school. "What you see is what you get with Ron Limeberger," Mr. Greg Meegan, a popular history teacher at CB, once remarked. Meegan doesn't

mince too many words himself. "He only has one face, and it's always to the front. He is brutally honest, courageous under fire, and the most loved teacher and coach I have ever known."

Jack Witry, a retired teacher whose own loyalty to CB is boundless, recalls his colleague and fellow coach, saying, "He loved that school. His heart and soul were in that school. He dedicated most of his life to the school. The school came first."

The Limeberger family is both pleased and humbled by this honor bestowed upon their dearly missed husband and father. Says Joan Limeberger: "He absolutely loved CB. That was the love of his life. I would always tease him that CB came first, that the kids and I were second. My family is thrilled. This is just so wonderful. I think it is deserving. But I only wish he could be here to see it."

And what would Ronnie's reaction be?

"He would cry," assures Mr. Witry.

And what will the gymnasium naming achieve?

"It will bring back memories," declares Mr. Witry. "Everybody who knows Christian Brothers knows Ronnie Limeberger. It will be an identity."

Indeed. But beyond that, it will be an advantage. Athletic teams and cultural performances will improve, liturgies will soar, assemblies will inspire. The school will rally and triumph. You doubt such miracles on Martin Luther King Boulevard? Hey, God didn't raise the roof for nothing. So close your eyes. Take a seat in the new gymnasium. Watch the action. Hear the thunder. And amid the cheers, hear the inimitable rat-tat-tat patter of Ronnie Limeberger.

With such a spirit present, how can we ever lose?

Bob Sylva is an alumnus and current parent. He is a staff writer for the Sacramento Bee and prepared this piece to aid the Major Gifts Committee in its fundraising efforts.