

Leon's Third Industrial Arts Centre

A gentle fighter, scholar and farmer, Leon Ingraham touched thousands of students as a principal and Industrial Arts teacher.

The story's not over.

BY LYNN McDOWELL

Leon Ingraham's career as an educator spanned 29 years. Even as principal of the 430-student Ridgevalley School in the Grande Prairie area of Northern Alberta—or perhaps because he was the principal—Leon stayed active in the classroom. Leon, who had a reputation as a “born teacher and administrator,” majored in chemistry and minored in industrial arts, taught a range of subjects, and earned a Masters' degree. His classroom passion, however, was industrial arts and equipping young people with practical skills for the future.

“He was a visionary,” says Evelyn, his wife of nearly 54 years, “more than we gave him credit for.” The farm boy from Ponoka grew up close to the present location of Mamawi Atosketan Native School (MANS). Through his own experience in “the School of Hard Knocks,” Leon recognized that two of the most important things he could do as a principal and educator were: 1) believe in and encourage kids, and 2) compliment their book learning with practical skills that build confidence and lead to jobs. Industrial arts (IA) helped him do both.

Industrial Arts Programs 1 and 2

Leon established his first IA program at Calgary's Forest Lawn Catholic School in 1961-62—his first year of teaching. He understood kids—how hard life can be for teens, how easy it is to give up and drop out. When his parents divorced, Leon, then a short, slightly-built Grade 9 student, dropped out of school. Self-defence became a priority for him, and the naturally-kind,

soft-spoken young man was to earn the runner up Lightweight golden gloves. Leon gained confidence.

The young dropout worked weekends and evenings with the Sylvan Lake Police Force as an officer and also drove a school bus. On his bus route was Evelyn Kisser, a young woman determined to finish high

The Ingraham family at Leon and Evelyn's 50th anniversary, about the time of their baptism in 1980. Chip (far left), now a dentist in Grand Prairie, and Curtis (far right), an award-winning civil engineer and Assistant Vice President of WSP | Parsons Brinckerhoff in California, worked with their dad in the family farm shop from a young age, learning skills they still apply daily.



school early. With a greater sense of direction, Leon quickly finished the adult education high school program. He enrolled in Education at the University of Alberta, married the love of his life the next summer, and transferred to the University of Calgary because the U of C offered a minor in his passion: industrial arts education.

Leon balanced many interests and demands. Besides teaching, he and Evelyn, along with their sons Chip and Curtis, farmed three sections, at times running 180 cattle. But around Ridgevalley School, Leon is known as the principal who insisted that every student take at least one typing class, and as the visionary who started and built Ridgevalley's highly-successful industrial arts program—the man who “In our hearts . . . will always remain the Principal

of Ridgevalley School.”

Ridgevalley was Leon's Industrial Arts Program #2.

A Heart for First Nations Youth

As an industrial arts teacher and principal, Leon encountered First Nations students from the reserve just a few miles from the Ingraham family's farm. “He had a soft spot for native people,” says Evelyn. He mentored many, encouraging them to stay in school. He picked up hitchhikers on their way to and from the reserve. He supported their industry by buying fish from them, and hired “old timers” to help clear the family's land, which he and Evelyn farmed for 51 years.

All Leon's compassion and skill was given renewed purpose when the Ingraham

family was baptized in 1980. Leon's common sense and administrative experience benefitted the Alberta Conference as Leon served on the Executive Committee, and as a church elder. He never slowed down, never lost his interest in supporting young people. Tragically, in a 2014 car accident that remains a puzzle, Leon's life was cut short.

But that did not end Leon's positive influence or IA program-building. Recently, the Ingraham family came forward with a gift that will make the Industrial Arts Centre at MANS a reality—Leon's IA program #3.

A Passion becomes a Legacy

“We didn't think very long about it,” explains Evelyn. “We knew it would be a good thing.” The family knew that Leon had a passion for IA and the difference it could make in young lives. They remembered the extra encouragement he went out of his way to deliver to many First Nations students. They decided to make a founding-level contribution to MANS' new IA Centre, which will be named in Leon's memory.

What an encouraging story to be able to tell MANS students: There was a young boy named Leon who grew up right here, a gentle fighter who took some hard knocks, who persevered through school, and found his calling in the tools that his family now place in your hands.

It's a visionary's legacy, one that will impact generations. 

Leon Ingraham earned a Master of Education Administration degree at the University of Alberta in 1983. In retirement, he continued to farm and use his IA skills, helping his sons build their houses, remodeling Chip's office, and keeping up his own farm buildings; horse riding helped him stay fit. Leon and Evelyn's family—Chip (Jodie Gray), Ryan (Tia Penner), and Scott; and Curtis (Robin Hass), Frances (Jeff Brady), Arthur, and Evania (Chris Chavez)—cherish Leon's memory and dynamic example.



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