

Treva Griesdorn Fortkamp went into the brick schoolhouse, found the light switch, found her spot, took a few shots. They didn't all go in but that was all right; they never do. But the one thing a gym teaches you is that there's always another chance.

The St. Rose Schoolhouse is a special place to Treva. She didn't study in it, as her dad and uncles and grandpa did. But in experiencing it in its second life as a gym instead of a school, she learned.

"I used a boys' basketball, there was no such thing as a three-point line, and you couldn't shoot a high arch because you'd hit the ceiling," she said. "But this was a safe haven. I could always come here."

The schoolhouse was built in 1892 and closed as a school in 1957. After that, local folks put up a couple of backboards with rims and it became a place where the kids in the neighborhood could play basketball, regardless of the weather. "I did tons of free throws here," Treva said. "There's just one line and a lane."

She grew up in a sporty family, her older brothers Craig and Jeff introducing her to the rules of the game, any game with a ball. "I either learned to catch a ball or I wore it," said Treva, in the common refrain of many little sisters of older brothers. "My parents were very involved in sports. We were kind of bred that way."

The Griesdorn kids grew up across the road but in sight of the old schoolhouse. Next door was Tom Prenger, who grew into a talented guard for the state champion 1975 Marion Local Flyers. The Griesdorns and Prengers shared an outdoor hoop, set in concrete in the back yard. But in the winter, the schoolhouse gym served them better.

"During basketball season, it was 20 degrees outside—who wants to play outdoors? Instead, I would grab my ball, my radio and a jug of water. I would walk over to the schoolhouse and play, all by myself most of the time. I credit the schoolhouse with the skills I have."

Treva would go to the schoolhouse, flip on the outdoor light, unlock the door with the key that had been entrusted to her family. As she honed her skills, she told herself stories. "I'm a competitor, so I would tell myself, 'You're shooting the last shot of the game.' And I wouldn't go home until I made the shot," she said. "Mom and dad could see the light on outside the front door (of the schoolhouse). They knew where I was."

The building was safe, but basic. Treva came home with her hands and ball black from the dirt picked up from the floor. But it was a wood floor, which she says is absolutely essential.

The first girl to play in St. Rose' little league, Treva would bring her bat and ball to the schoolhouse yard in the summer, throwing the ball up, hitting it, chasing it. Summer brought other chores, as the Griesdorns were responsible for cleaning the church and helping to maintain the St. Rose cemetery. Treva and her brothers trimmed around every gravestone with hand clippers. They dusted off every pew in the church.

She went on to play with the Marion Local girls' basketball team, alongside Bev Obringer. A young program, the Flyers made it to the regional finals before Treva graduated in 1985. She went on to earn her degree in education and taught first in Troy before her future husband, "fellow St. Rosian Herbie Fortkamp, said he wasn't going to move to Troy," she said.

After they married in 1992, she took a teaching job at Marion Local, and coaches girls' basketball. The fire is still within her. "Every team is my mortal enemy when I walk in the gym. The team and the ones in stripes," she said. "I did a lot of visualization when I was learning the game, and I still try to teach that to kids, the imagery of the game. 'There's five seconds to go, you're going to take it from here.' I have them practice that because those are vivid things in a kid's mind."

A disciplinarian with a teacher's carrying voice, Treva is tough on the outside, but most people can see through that to her heart of gold. She greets old friends and little kids wherever she goes. She's crazy about her daughter and her two granddaughters. She's trying to ensnare the older one, now two, into the family obsession with hoops.

"I say to her, 'Squirt, let's go play ball,'" she said. "Her dad says, 'She's going to be busy farming.'"

Way beyond those two beloved little girls, Treva wants the best for all the kids in the area. She knows she grew up in blessed light, lucky in her family and her neighbors, who included Ted Hemmelgarn, who taught at St. Rose School for decades, and his wife, Marie. Lucky in her hometown and its little homemade gym.

She wants new generations of kids to know that they have a place they can go to play ball. She was quick to join the committee that is rehabbing the schoolhouse. As light and bright and clean as it will be on the inside, its mission of being a haven for kids will not change.

"The outside will be just the same, that's the major culture of it," Treva said. "There absolutely has to be a wooden floor. There just has to be. But I hope kids can go there and come out with clean hands and a clean basketball."

When it reopens as Our Fathers House, she plans to keep a watchful eye on it, as always. "Thanks to the donors, kids can now use it forever, just like I did. I want the kids to know, 'This is a gift, respect it. Your kids will want to use it someday too.'"