

➤ GROUNDS KEEPER

At the center of the schoolyard, my 4-year-old son climbs a towering web, carefully placing each small foot on the same rungs where I had placed mine 25 years earlier. "This is your school?" he asks.

"This was my school," I say, "when I was about your age." But he has already hopped down and run off to explore.

McKinley Elementary was where I attended grade school, beginning as a shy kindergartner and growing into a school-ruling fifth-grader. The orange brick building is just four blocks from the Lakewood house where I grew up.

The school now stands vacant, dark and quiet. A few windows are cracked and the field is overrun with weeds. Woodchips have replaced the pebbles that my friends and I would kick up while chasing each other at recess, and then pick out of our shoes back in the classroom. But most everything else appears the same. I almost expect to hear a bell ring and see my childhood friends come running around the corner.

But all the kids are gone. It's late April and the building will soon be torn down, the old classrooms replaced by new townhomes.

"Daddy, look at me!" My son stands at the top of a pod-shaped play set with red ladder-like sides, a blue dome and a tall yellow tube running down its center. "This is so awesome!"

He's right. At one time, I climbed up, down, in and around this play set nearly every day. It seems smaller now but looks identical to when my friends and I roamed the playground. I duck my head and crawl inside, feeling part child and part giant.

My friends and I had first pretended it was a rocket ship. We sat inside with our knees to our chests and hollered a countdown: "three, two, one!" Another year, it served as home base for games of tag. The girls sat on top, refusing to come down, as we yelled, "You can't do that!" When we were older, it became our hangout — a hideaway all our own.

I had sat at the top of the dome — where my son now sits — and watched the world that busied itself on the other side of the fence. I knew that someday I would step into that grown-up world. But back then, someday felt like forever. My small existence had consisted of this building, this playground and the four blocks between the school and my house.

When I return in June with my wife and son to watch the demolition, a chain-link fence surrounds McKinley. I stand outside the fence as an excavator stretches out a long arm and smacks a bucket into the side of the building. Bricks drop into a cloud of dust.

Men in yellow hard hats carry out the last remnants of school

by AARON SCHMIDT

life — plastic chairs, flip-top desks, tables, lunch trays — and toss them into a mound of debris. The scene looks like an archaeological dig of my childhood.

A sidewall is knocked out, opening up the school building like the back of a dollhouse. I see my old classrooms for the first time since I was 10. Images of teachers and classmates resurface from under the weight of two-and-a-half decades.

I realize the school was a place of firsts. It's where I made my first friends. It's where I learned to do all those things — write sentences, read instructions, multiply and divide numbers — that I do every day without thinking. And it's where I first held hands with a girl, cupping Emily's hand in mine, flushed with that funny feeling a boy first feels for a girl.

This was where my life first took shape. I watch those memories get scooped up, swung over the parking lot and dropped into the back of a dump truck to be hauled off. But I want to keep one.

"I think I want the play set," I say to my wife.

"What would we do with it?" she asks.

"I don't know," I say. "I just know I want it."

So we ask. Everything is headed for scrap, the foreman tells us.

He rounds up a few hands to help me unearth it. They cut through eight aluminum posts, chain it to a Bobcat, lift it off the ground and ease it into the back of my friend's trailer.

At home, we haul it across my backyard and drop it into the soft lawn. My son runs across the yard, scales the side and pulls himself over the dome. He stands proud at the top — chest out, wide grin — reminding me of another boy that used to stand up there.

The corner of Northwood Avenue and West Clifton Boulevard is now an empty lot, primed for modern townhomes to be formed and a school forgotten. But a piece of the school remains in my backyard.

I had rescued the old play set as a keepsake of my school, my friends and my childhood. But as my son and I spend more time playing on it together, I see it as more than just a memento of a past life. It still has something to offer.

Someday he'll look back on these days as I look back on my own. This aluminum time capsule, packed with memories from my past, has room left inside for me and my son to make a few of our own. **Cle**