

A student's note in a bottle shows up decades later at her old school

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Makenzie Van Eyk (center) with her two children, Scarlet (left) and Huxley (right). They are at the pier with her fourth-grade teacher, Roland St. Pierre (far left). That's where Van Eyk tossed a message in a bottle in the lake as part of a school assignment in 1998. Photo: Courtesy of the Windsor-Essex Catholic District School Board

Makenzie Van Eyk is from the small town of Belle River in Ontario, Canada. She grew up there but moved away as an adult. She recently moved back to raise her family.

In 1998, Van Eyk was in fourth grade at St. John the Baptist Catholic Elementary School in Belle River. At the time, she tossed a message in a bottle into a lake as part of a school assignment. She thought she'd never see it again.

She hadn't thought about the bottle in 26 years. Then, she got a phone call in October from her children's school.

The secretary had interesting news to share. A kindergarten student at the school had found Van Eyk's decades-old message in a bottle. It was floating near the shore of Lake St. Clair. It was not far from where Van Eyk originally tossed it as a fourth grader all those years ago.

"I instantly started crying. I was very emotional," said Van Eyk. "It was unbelievable."

Van Eyk found it so moving because her daughter, Scarlet, is currently a fourth-grader at the school. She is 9 years old. Van Eyk also has a son, Huxley, who is 6 years old.

Van Eyk was 9 years old when she wrote that letter, and now her daughter is the same age at the same school.

She said Scarlet's teacher shared the letter with her class, and Scarlet was elated. "My kids were buzzing for the whole weekend."

A teacher at the school also contacted Roland St. Pierre, Van Eyk's fourth-grade teacher, to tell him about the bottle. He was equally stunned.

"It brought back a lot of good memories," said St. Pierre, who retired in 2005. He taught at the school for 33 years and was himself an elementary student there.

A School Assignment

The message in a bottle assignment was part of a geography lesson St. Pierre taught about the Great Lakes. That is a chain of five lakes (Superior, Michigan, Huron, Erie, and Ontario) in the United States and Canada. They drain through the Saint Lawrence River into the Atlantic Ocean.

"We read a book called 'Paddle-to-the-Sea,'" Van Eyk said. "It was about a little boy who carved a paddle, and that piece of wood floated all the way through the Great Lakes."

"I thought, let's do kind of the same thing with our bottles," said St. Pierre.

Each of his 30 students wrote a letter and included at least one thing they learned in class about the Great Lakes or the water cycle. That cycle explains how water moves around the Earth.

Van Eyk said the school had just installed its first computer lab when the students started the message-in-a-bottle assignment. So, they typed their letters.

"This letter is coming from Makenzie Morris, and I go to St. John the Baptist school," Van Eyk typed in her letter.

"Do you know that all the Great Lakes spell H O M E S ?" she wrote. "I thought that was cool." The Great Lakes include Lake Huron, Lake Ontario, Lake Michigan, Lake Erie, and Lake Superior.

The letter ends with contact information for the school. The phone number listed is the same as it is today.

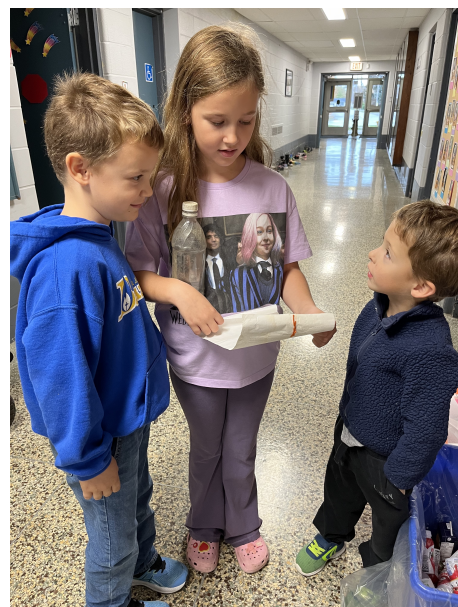


Image 1. Huxley and Scarlet read their Mom's letter with River, the student who found the bottle, on the far right. Photo: Courtesy of Makenzie Van Eyk

Van Eyk doesn't remember much about the assignment. But she vividly recalls sealing the bottles with wax.

Teacher and Student Meet Again

St. Pierre and Van Eyk decided to meet up in person at the same spot where they threw the letters in the lake. It was a happy reunion for both of them.

"We gave each other a big hug," said St. Pierre, adding that they talked about their time together at the school. "She was a good student. Makenzie had a lot of energy; she was spunky."

Van Eyk is also an educator. She said the story highlights the lifelong connections students make with their teachers.

"I think it goes back to the power of education ... and just the energy that you put into teaching and how it comes back around," she said.

Van Eyk is collaborating with the school to create a permanent display for the letter. That way future students can delight in the unexpected finding, too.

"It certainly feels like a big treasure for me," she said.

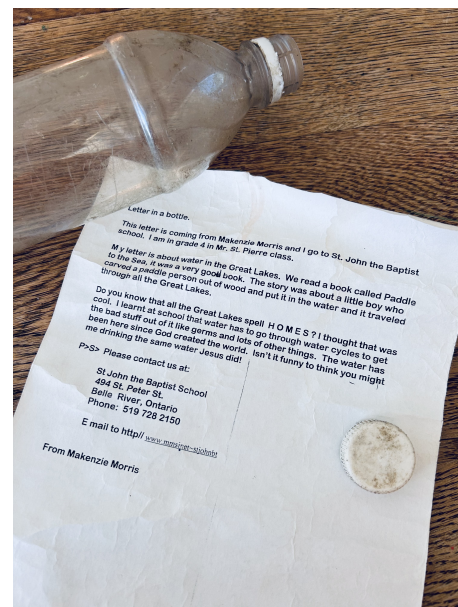


Image 2. The letter Van Eyk typed as a fourth grader. Photo: Courtesy of Makenzie Van Eyk

Quiz

- 1 Read the introduction [paragraphs 1-10]. Which selection from this section supports the conclusion that Van Eyk's children were excited about the letter?
- (A) "I instantly started crying. I was very emotional," said Van Eyk. "It was unbelievable."
 - (B) Van Eyk found it so moving because her daughter, Scarlet, is currently a fourth-grader at the school. She is 9 years old.
 - (C) Van Eyk was 9 years old when she wrote that letter, and now her daughter is the same age at the same school.
 - (D) She said Scarlet's teacher shared the letter with her class, and Scarlet was elated. "My kids were buzzing for the whole weekend."
- 2 Read the section "A School Assignment." Which selection from the section shows what Van Eyk and her class had to put in their messages?
- (A) The message in a bottle assignment was part of a geography lesson St. Pierre taught about the Great Lakes. That is a chain of five lakes (Superior, Michigan, Huron, Erie, and Ontario) in the United States and Canada.
 - (B) "We read a book called 'Paddle-to-the-Sea,'" Van Eyk said. "It was about a little boy who carved a paddle, and that piece of wood floated all the way through the Great Lakes."
 - (C) Each of his 30 students wrote a letter and included at least one thing they learned in class about the Great Lakes or the water cycle. That cycle explains how water moves around the Earth.
 - (D) Van Eyk said the school had just installed its first computer lab when the students started the message-in-a-bottle assignment. So, they typed their letters.
- 3 What is the relationship between Van Eyk and the person who found the letter?
- (A) They were both students who learned about the Great Lakes from St. Pierre.
 - (B) They were both students at St. John the Baptist Catholic Elementary School.
 - (C) They were both educators who assigned messages in bottles to their students.
 - (D) They were both educators who taught elementary students in Ontario, Canada.
- 4 What caused St. Pierre and Van Eyk to reunite by a lake?
- (A) It was the exact area where the Great Lakes drain to the Atlantic Ocean.
 - (B) It was the same place where the class threw their messages in the bottles.
 - (C) Van Eyk wanted to surprise St. Pierre with the news of the bottle's discovery.
 - (D) Van Eyk and the school planned to honor St. Pierre's time as a teacher there.