

This essay was read at the reunion by Arthur H. Gunther III

On a sentimental evening, we are not just about sentiment. There's sentimentality in this room, of course. How could it be otherwise five decades later in this now retouching of friendships and the opening of memory pages? No, sentiment did not get us here, we collection of the successful, the survivors, the lucky. We are as youth once again, yet our lives prove the long journey beyond.

Each class, in whatever age, wherever in the world, has its flavor, its special stamp. Geography, the decade, social direction, the economy, our parents, teachers and whatever other influences the universe gives in the moment help spawn and grow the class. There is the reality of local, national and international events, including war. Economic change. Vast social change. Our own maturing. How our dreams fared. What we wish for succeeding generations. Our health. Our relationships. The complications-- the joys and sorrows -- of the last 50 years, different lives but still, in all that, shared high school DNA, the leitmotif of the Class of 1961.

That peculiar mix, so well stirred in our years at Spring Valley High, began with the bringing together of kids from varied neighborhoods -- the North and South Main Street Schools, St. Joseph's, Monsey, English Church, Camp Hill, New Hempstead, Happy Valley, Lakeside, and then, toward the end of our high school run, transfer students from New York City as the suburbs started to build. We had a first year of being together in the new junior high of the old Ramapo II School District -- ninth grade in 1957-58 at the former high school, a building that many of our parents attended. Time went so very quickly that season, but the months were enough to push us away from our elementary years and those particular communities into the yin and yang of high school, and to stir the juices of anticipation of what being sophomores, then juniors and, finally, big seniors would be like. How eager were we to grow up.

Each of us has particular memories of Spring Valley High -- the teachers who meant the most, some giving us life-changing direction. The friends we made, some for life, others now seen again, with 50 years just a second in time, so mutual are our thoughts and ways, even if not shared for so many seasons. Some recall the sports we played, the socialization of football and basketball games, the clubs we joined, Regents exams, the proms, first dates, first love, first cars. All remember the sudden passing of our classmate Fred Yatto and how on that November 1960 day we among the young learned that life was finite. Some 16 of our comrades have reminded us since.

Most of us have moved away from Rockland, from the Spring Valley area and a main street where we knew all the shopkeepers, a downtown recognizable only in revisited memory. But for a time, in our time, the Spring Valley Theatre, Brown's Luncheonette, Arvanite's, Bauer's market, Ro-Field Appliances, Nat Kaplan's, Shapiro's, Perruna's, Kulle's Tire, K&A Hardware, drug stores, bakeries, barbershops and so many other businesses gave us a sense of continuity in our hometown. We were all part of Small Town, America.

We took the hometown feeling and that of the close high school community with us, even as we rushed on graduation night, cap and gown flung off, diploma in hand, to jump into college, the workplace, families, careers, other towns. We were in such a hurry that we did not see the door closing on such a vital chapter in our individual lives.

Where were our hearts and heads these 50 years? We built careers, families, relationships, lost parents and friends, experienced joy and sadness and the great in-between that fuels most of life. As the decades passed, we became far removed from the youth of our high school years, from the village where we were cast. Yet, the experiences of Spring Valley high, our elementary seasons before, our downtown, all that we then had remained in our subconscious, as circuits that simply were not switched on for a long time, save the occasional flashback. Now, tonight, this weekend, after the preparation of two years by the extraordinary reunion committee, the circuits are again energized.

So, it is not sentiment alone, this reuniting. It is a deliberate turn of the head back to the closing doors of Spring Valley High as we left pomp and circumstance in June 1961. We did not look then; we do now. This time, we can see what the future brought. This time we know that within the walls of that Route 59 building were the ingredients of a unique alchemy that made us, and only us, the Class of 1961.