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First Palo Verde grads reconnect, recollect, reflect

By Johanna Willett Arizona Daily Star Sep 27, 2014

'Mr. Kennedy was shot.'

Linda Scalise, 68, still remembers when a classmate ducked into her Oriental history class at Palo Verde High School and whispered those words into her ear.

The announcement that rattled over the school intercom on Nov. 22, 1963 still resonates with Palo Verde High School's first graduating class, even as it prepares to celebrate its 50th reunion in October.

Classes stopped. Students gathered in the library. Some went home. The inaugural football game on the 1-year-old school's new field was canceled, as the nation mourned the assassination of President John F. Kennedy.

The senior class never did get a game in that stadium. The panoramic photo of the class members standing on the bleachers and squinting into the sun records perhaps their only time together in the stadium. "It was hotter than Hades," remembers **Susan Seiler Lane**, 68.

For two years, the class of 1964 — with more than 500 graduates — ruled Palo Verde High School at 1302 S. Avenida Vega, now a STEAM (science, technology, engineering, arts and math) magnet school.

In the fall of 1962, the school opened to freshmen, sophomores and juniors from overcrowded Rincon and Catalina high schools — about 2,000 students, Scalise says. The senior class members spent two, memory-marked years at the school before graduating and going their separate ways.

The 50th reunion committee knows of at least 40 classmates who have died. Every 10 years or so, graduates gather again. So far, Scalise says, nearly 200 are coming to the 50th reunion. She remembers about 100 graduates at the 40th reunion and 50 at the 45th. The 20th and 30th reunions both had high turnouts.

The reunion committee does this for fun, and many members have worked together since their 20th class get together. They gather for lunch, reminisce and plan. This time around, they started planning about two years in advance.

"There's an understanding, a silent understanding of a friendship that was always there," says **John Bingham**, 68. "It's never going to be lost."

Friends and committee members **Douglas Meriwether**, **Dick Patterson** and **Tom Higgins** never did lose touch. Meriwether returned to Tucson, after living around the country for years, for his buddies.

With only three classes starting at the school that first year, the classes of 1964, 1965 and 1966 bonded. They picked the school colors (gold and royal blue), anointed a mascot (the Titans) and forged other lasting traditions.

When the reunion committee met in the Palo Verde library earlier this month to plan and tour the school, the din of nostalgia spilled into the halls.

Remember that day it snowed, and we had a snowball fight here? Remember dancing in the gym in our socks to protect the new floor from scuff marks? Remember using pompoms with bricks, so that our movements would be sharp and strong? Remember, remember, remember.

"We had a good time in high school," Scalise says. "We're not trying to relive it. We are each trying to enjoy some aspect of high school."

From high school bookworms to cool kids and life in between, the members of the reunion committee — not all friends in high school — have found a different kind of friendship as adults.

"You kind of have some preconceived notions of people from different circles that you're in at that point of time and then find out 'hey, they're just like you' with similar life experiences," says **Roy Ireland**, 68. "You regret it. 'Geez, I wish I had gotten to know them sooner.'"

Graduating in an era before Facebook or other social media, many of the school's grads lost touch.

"There's a connection with all of these people that supersedes reunions," says **Connie Arthur Bingham**, 68. "It's just your memories from the past and the things that you did when you were a kid."

Connie Bingham married her husband and fellow 1964 grad John Bingham in 1989 after reconnecting at a reunion planning committee. Both were divorced, but neither was looking for a new spouse.

They grew up in the same neighborhood, but lost touch after high school. A classmate set them up years later after a committee meeting.

"There will be girls coming to this reunion who are single and wanting to rekindle old relationships, and guys coming there to cruise," John Bingham says.

For the Bingham, shared history drew them together.

Patterson, 68, calls their class the "products of the '50s" who grew up in "this idyllic time in America where everything was going well." The reunion committee members agree that they were sheltered.

They remember their class as mostly, if not all, white. Tsuyoshi Nakayama, an exchange student from Japan, won the school's hearts. They crowned him king at the Rodeo Dance.

The girls aspired to work as nurses, secretaries, bookkeepers or teachers. They shopped for weeks to find Levi's to wear during Rodeo Week. With the exception of another day set aside for Bermuda shorts, the dress code required dresses and skirts, which were often measured for length.

When Beatlemania swept through the school, shaggy hair meant a ticket home for a trim. **Chris O'Dell**, who graduated the next year, would go on to work her way into the Beatles' inner circle, singing in the chorus of "Hey Jude" and perching on chimney with Ken Mansfield, Yoko Ono and Ringo Starr's then-wife Maureen Starkey Tigrett for the Beatles' last concert on the Apple Corps roof.

Life experiences aside, high school memories will prevail next month.

For the 50th reunion, the committee plans to recreate a "boondocker," or desert party. These secret parties thrown in the washes had ample alcohol and required a map to find them.

One infamous boondocker instigated a police call that led to students being hauled into the principal's office for punishment the next week — as they tell it.

October's barbecue at the Tanque Verde Ranch and the cocktail party at Mountain Oyster Club the next day should be tamer as these alumni celebrate Palo Verde's first 50th reunion.

"As individuals, we didn't think we were special but it was special picking colors and the song and logo," says Connie Bingham. "Those are things our class did, and they've held up all this time, and so when you think back in retrospect that is kind of special."

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Where are they now?

Checking in with a few Palo Verde grads from those first three classes.

Zeke Browning, 67. Class of 1964.

Writes freelance articles and novels in mystery and other genres. Lives north of Prescott and plans to attend the reunion.

Stand-out high school memory: "I had an English teacher that got married during the school year, and I remember somebody in the classroom said, 'Do you know how to cook?' And she said, 'Any damn fool that can read can cook.' And we all sat up, but beyond that, she spurred an interest in English."

Whitt McKinney, 67. Class of 1964.

Writes and produces a musical comedy act, The Washtub Two with his wife. Lives in Owosso, Michigan, and is not attending the reunion.

Stand-out high school memory: "The songleaders were dressed up in pajamas and had stuffed animals and were pantomiming to 'Mr. Sandman,' and we had a 235-pound guy strung up on a rope over stage, and he was supposed to swing across ... and throw glitter over them, and he got a his arm caught in the rope. As he swept across the stage, he clobbered a girl in the head and knocked her down and then hung there helplessly across the stage, and then they closed the curtain."

Joyce Huntington, 68. Class of 1964.

A visionary artist who paints based on what she sees in meditation. Lives in Ojai, California, and is not attending the reunion.

Stand-out high school memory: "The boondocker, of course, oh my goodness. I ended up going but only for a few minutes ... I got the map, and we decided to go, and it was late and really dark and hard to get to ... We got hauled off to the authorities (later) to be questioned. I was in a wheelchair, so nobody expected me to be there, and everyone thought it was so funny, because I left these huge tracks. I was definitely there."

Chris O'Dell, 67. Class of 1965.

Retired counselor and hypnotherapist with a focus on drug rehabilitation. Former secretary for the Beatles, personal assistant for the Rolling Stones and one of the first female tour managers in rock 'n' roll for other celebrity musicians. Lives in Roatán, Honduras and travels the world. She is not attending the reunion.

Stand-out high school memory. "My junior year was the Beatles' first album. I was so blown away by them. ... After Kennedy's death, it was what we needed for our generation — something that was our own."

The 50th reunion

Palo Verde High School graduates from the the classes of 1964, 1965 and 1966 can attend. For information on the reunion and registration, visit paloverde64.com

4:30 - 10 p.m. Friday, Oct. 17 — Barbecue at the Tanque Verde Ranch Cottonwood Grove, 14301 E. Speedway. Dinner begins at 6 p.m. \$55 and cash bar.

10 a.m. Saturday, Oct. 18 — Tour of Palo Verde High Magnet School, 1302 S. Avenida Vega.

2 p.m. Saturday, Oct. 18 — Choir reunion at Mountain Oyster Club ballroom, 6400 E. El Dorado Plaza, with classmates and director.

5:30 - 7 p.m. Saturday, Oct. 18 — Hors d'oeuvres and cocktails at Mountain Oyster Club ballroom. \$25 plus drink tickets.

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