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Kevin O'Hara Half a century gone by so quickly



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St. Joseph High School Class of 1967. Kevin O'Hara photo

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By Kevin O'Hara

PITTSFIELD — When a purple and gold envelope arrived at my door back in April, I shuddered. This unsettling correspondence wasn't for jury duty, an audit from the IRS, or even a reminder from my physician that I've yet to schedule a colonoscopy. No, it was an invitation to my 50th class reunion at St. Joseph High School — Class of 1967.

I imagined the event itself would be wonderful, but was discombobulated by the stunning realization that five decades had passed so swiftly. Over the years, I had studied scores of 50th class reunion photos published in The Eagle. I'd survey the group's wizened faces with queasy fascination, wondering what my own mug would look like at that ripe age. Now, with card in hand, I gazed into a mirror and, egads, I had officially joined the ranks of the aged!

Despite the harsh reminder of the passing years, I readily signed up for Friday's "Meet and Greet" at the Pittsfield Country Club, to be followed by dinner at Mazzeo's Ristorante on Saturday. I had missed our previous reunions, but couldn't pass up on this milestone. With the recent closing of our beloved school after 120 years, I was especially eager to join my fellow "Joeys" in what might be our Last Hurrah.

Departed colleagues

That night, I dug out my dusty old yearbook, "The Traveler," and studied the 140 black-and-white portraits of my fellow classmates. Shockingly, I'd forgotten so many, but others came back in a flood of memories, as I vividly recalled their quirks and mannerisms, pranks and accomplishments. I sadly touched the photos of 14 colleagues now deceased: Janet Campbell, Jim Clark, Olivia Wood...

Among those departed was my good friend, David Carron, a gifted musician whose band, The Quarry, had played on the free stage at Woodstock back in '69. Upon my inglorious return home from Vietnam, David was the first to greet me with open arms. A memory I'll cherish always. Ten of us served in Vietnam, and all returned home safe.

That Saturday, 50 classmates showed up at Mazzeo's, from as far afield as Florida, Nebraska, and Texas. The dining room buzzed with such merriment that the young servers took pause from their duties to marvel at the camaraderie of our assembly, brought together for a few precious hours after so many years.

We spoke of past sweethearts, prom nights, and the crowds that crammed into Wahconah Park or the Boys' Club to watch our winning football and basketball teams. We fondly recalled our Big Brothers and Big Sisters, caring seniors assigned to guide us incoming freshmen through that difficult first year. During the revelry, six of nine cheerleaders present broke out into a spirited school chant, "Give me an S! Give me a T!"

After dinner, and a few words by the class clown chosen as emcee (that would be me), our reunion committee — led by Marilyn Roulier Kirby, Barbara Dwyer Bashara, and Steve St. Peter — took a moment to reflect on our 14 classmates who had passed on, reminding us to enjoy every moment God gives us. "Amen to that," I said to myself, feeling much better about the age I had reached.

Of course, no parochial school reunion would be complete without the swapping of favorite nun stories, names that still rattled off our tongues like a championship baseball team: Sisters Cecilia James, Mary Patrice, Wilfrid Marie, Mary Anita, John Edward, Helen Catherine...

A toast to sisters

Sister Mary Dorothy, a notorious disciplinarian, was the stellar headliner. Amid our rising mirth, one classmate recalled how "Mary Dot" had made up for her corporal punishments in the classroom by becoming pastoral minister for St. Joseph Parish, after her retirement in 1980. For the next 30 years, well into her 80s, she had tirelessly devoted herself to the ministry of serving the poor, shut-ins, and the elderly throughout the city. I well remember her kindly visits to my own mom, then living at Berkshiretown.

"The nuns always get a bad rap," our reminiscent classmate continued. "They were strict, for sure, but they taught us to respect our elders, to appreciate the world around us, to follow the Gospels, and inspired us to believe in ourselves. Nothing wrong with that."

"A toast to the sisters of St. Joseph, then," I raised my glass to the assembly. "And let us pray that if the dear nuns are looking down upon us tonight, we of the Class of '67 did not disappoint them." At night's close, amid teary farewells and far-fetched promises of staying in touch, the committee urged us to commit to returning for 60th reunion, and even a 70th. I quickly signed up for both, to keep the proud legacy of our school alive, yes, but believing I might just live another 20 years by doing so.

Kevin O'Hara is an occasional Eagle contributor.

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