



Wilson celebrates the golden years

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The Southwest Community Connection Oct 27, 2006

More than 15,000 people have gone to Woodrow Wilson High School over the last 50 years. They range in ages from 15 to 68, not counting the teachers and faculty members who also have special allegiance to the school. Today the students have grown up to become senators, doctors, teachers, construction workers and more. A fraction of them congregated in October to wander the halls of their alma mater and reminisce with friends at the school that united them all.

Wilson High School first opened to the public in 1956. To celebrate the 50th anniversary, a group of alumni planned a series of events to take place throughout the year. The kickoff event, held in conjunction with Homecoming weekend, was Oct. 21.

The weekend began with Wilson's homecoming game against Grant. The alumni were specially recognized with their own section in the stands. The theme was superheros and the students carried Spiderman, Superman and Batman floats around the field as not to damage the newly constructed track.

The next morning, the festivities began again at the track as the school held a fun run/walk to thank supporters who had raised money for the top-of-the-line, eight-lane track. The free event earned \$1,000 for the school as Oregon Health and Science University's sports medicine program donated \$5 for every person who attended.

Next there was a parade of cars representing various years from Wilson's history. The cars were staged in the Rieke Elementary School parking lot, which was Wilson Park Elementary when many of the alumni went there before it changed names in 1978.

In the afternoon alumni explored the school through decorated rooms dedicated to the various decades the school had been open.

Beloved teacher

The evening continued with an intergenerational dance and a performance by a mixed choir of past students. A highlight for many was getting to see beloved choir teacher Merle Lotz who taught at the school for 20 years and had four children who went to Wilson.

The choir came together an hour before the performance to rehearse "The Creation," a group of songs Lotz said "every high school sang back then."

In 1971 Lotz had led the choir on a tour through Europe singing those same songs. He said the six-week trip through France, England, Scotland, Germany and Austria was one of his favorite memories from Wilson.

"The Europeans couldn't believe we had a high school that big," he said.

At the dance the choir's performance was met with a standing ovation from the audience and the choir chanting Lotz's name.

"He was very inspirational," explained Janet Dinihanian, class of '68. "He was very dedicated and he took music very seriously."

Current Wilson choir teacher Steve Peter said that he understands the former students' reaction to Lotz, explaining that choir teachers usually have the same kids through all four years of high school so they get to know each other well.

"The bond between most high school singers and their choir director is so special," he said. "You're not a student; you're a young friend."

Lotz retired from Wilson and went on to play the piano in the Oregon Symphony for 32 years. Despite having spent many years away from the school, the chance to see their favorite teacher was the reason many alumni returned for the anniversary.

"As soon as people heard he was going to be involved, they came out of the woodwork," said Brian Rosenthal, who was an event organizer and a graduate from the class of 1978. "He was a fantastic teacher."

After the choir performed, former students mingled around the cake table or on the dance floor. The tables had binders full of tributes to favorite teachers from former students.

A common theme at the anniversary dance was a legacy of families. Parents who attended the school had children who followed in their footsteps. Jim Chesnutt, class of '81, has been the volunteer physician for the football team for the football team for 12 years and has a daughter who is a sophomore. He said some of his favorite memories from Wilson were being involved with music and that his daughter also now plays in the band.

"I played in the orchestra and in the show band for the musicals," he said. "It was a great pressure release for me. Now after years of budget cuts, Wilson's band is coming back."

Dinihanian also has a daughter who now goes to Wilson. "It's great coming back. I'm enjoying it better the second time around."

Throughout the day, the alumni shared stories of their memories of high school, how Wilson had changed and how they had changed. They recalled when the cafeteria served rice and gravy for 5 cents, when the kids in shop class would climb the walls and when the school had a gymnastics team, but not many other sports for women.

Though the fall anniversary events are over, Jack Bertell, alum of the class of '58 and a retired Wilson math teacher, said there are plans for more events later in the year. Ideas include planting 50 trees to signify the 50 years and burying a time capsule.

"This is energizing some people. I think we're going to get increased involvement," he said.