

THE SWEET LEGACY OF WEEQUAHIC

It was not from our differences, but from the traditions that we have in common, that gave birth to the Weequahic High School Alumni Association in 1997

Editorial by Hal Braff, Class of 1952, from the May 1999 Alumni Calumet

In his fascinating reflection on Newark in the first half of the 20th century, William B. Helmreich in his book The Enduring Community reminds us that: "*Weequahic's primary claim to fame, and justifiably so, was its student body and its faculty. It achieved a reputation as one of the best high schools in the country...*"

Our school - our neighborhood! No matter where we now live or what we've accomplished, we are, all of us, Newarkers - products of that special place and time.

Weequahic High School, age 74, is still the grand *Wigwam on the Hill*, stately and aging remarkably well, although an eyewitness to the dramatic shift in cultures and economics that has taken place over the years.

For the first half of its life, it housed an overwhelmingly Jewish student body. Today the same seats in the auditorium, the same apartments and houses we lived in, and the same streets where we played are now occupied by African-Americans.

It was not from our differences, but from the traditions that we have in common, that gave birth to the Weequahic High School Alumni Association in 1997 - a unique opportunity to bring people together - people who seemed so far apart yet who have shared something significant and precious: their lives were shaped in their Weequahic years.

Our motivation was to tap into both the vast energy which brings so many of us back to reunions and the warm nostalgic pleasure we feel whenever we see, anywhere, orange and brown things together.

OUR GOALS ARE PROFOUND:

- To recapture the spirit and memories of Weequahic High School that were so meaningful to many of us.
- To transcend the generational and cultural differences spanning seven decades from 1932 to the present by bringing together our graduates, teachers, administrators and friends for reunions and special events.
- To remember and honor those Weequahic High School graduates and staff who have made important contributions to the school and our larger community.
- To utilize the resources of our alumni to support the current students at Weequahic High School through scholarships, tutoring, mentoring, job opportunities and cultural events.

With the Alumni Association we re-form and join with those who followed us through the halls of Weequahic to preserve our history, to build new friendships and to rebuild the trust so essential to a healthy society.

With you added to our membership list we can provide educational grants to some wonderful young men and women who lack only financial aid to be able to attend college.

In 1998 the Alumni Association presented four scholarships at the June graduation. We made a difference in those four lives.

We urge you to join with us. You have very little to lose and, I assure you, we all have a great deal to gain.

The Weequahic High School Alumni Association Story

By Phil Yourish, Class of 1964, Executive Director

It's so hard to believe that it was only 1997 when the alumni association made its debut at The Newark Public Library. So much has happened since. Who knew then that the visions leaping around in the minds of *Hal Braff*, class of 1952, and *Sheldon Bross*, class of 1955, would capture the hearts of so many Weequahic alumni. Who knew that an idea of fancy would turn into such a viable organization that has made many significant contributions.

It's been an incredible journey - so much accomplished in so little time. As we move forward in our 12th year, I can remember vividly how it all began. We were a group built on the intangibles - *dreams, visions, faith, trust, enthusiasm and the good intentions of a small group of alumni*. And we secretly wondered how far would that take us?

I can recall that fabled Friday evening at the Library when more than 300 alumni showed up, elbows touching elbows, in a place too small for such a large crowd, thrilled about reconnecting with classmates and friends from the high school of their youth.

That night was the first tangible - *real evidence that this improbable idea might actually have some substance*. We got the attention of our alumni, but could we sustain it? There were still the doubters. Was this just a one-time feel-good occasion or could we build upon it and garner greater interest and participation? Only time would provide the answers.

Over the years we have grown steadily. The response from our alumni has been exceptional.

Since 1997, we have brought thousands of alumni, from all generations, living in all parts of the United States and other parts of the world, "*back to the old neighborhood*." Today, we have more than 7,500 alumni on our mailing list and more than 1,300 members representing eight decades from 1933 to 2009. Our biggest alumni states are New Jersey, Florida and California, but we have alumni in almost every state and 12 countries as well. And we have an office at the high school, a part-time paid Executive Director, and twenty-one alumni serving on our Board of Trustees.

Our 20-page *Alumni Calumet* newsletter, which is published three to four times a year, has become the hallmark of our organization. Chock full of wonderful articles and pictures from the past and present, it's the tether that connects alumni everywhere with their fond memories of growing up in Weequahic and attending a very special high school. Alumni tell us that when they see the orange and brown in their mailbox, they immediately read it from cover to cover.

And visiting our *web site* is a unique experience in virtual reality. It includes the history of the high school and alumni association; a centralized listing by class year of all alumni who register; announcements of alumni events and class reunions; an alumni store where merchandise can be purchased on-line; current high school and alumni news; an extensive gallery of pictures on Weequahic and Newark; a section of alumni profiles and alumni who have passed away; and so much more.

Today the Weequahic name is still magic. When uttered, it immediately launches a flow of wonderful memories from the past. It connects us with our roots, to the days of our youth, and to the moments when everything just felt right and good.

The colors *Orange and Brown*, a most unlikely combination, are viewed as beautiful by only those who attended the high school. And the twelve years of the alumni association has been an unparalleled phenomena.

When people speak of Weequahic, they usually describe it as follows:

- *a very special place;*
- *the best years of my life;*
- *an outstanding high school;*
- *a great place to grow up;*
- *I wish it had never ended;*
- *I wish my children could have grown up there.*

In his book, *The Enduring Community*, William Helmreich describes the high school as follows:

Weequahic's primary claim to fame, and justifiably so, was its student body and its faculty. It achieved a reputation as one of the best high schools in the country...The faculty at Weequahic was outstanding by all accounts. The staff had terrific raw

material to work with.Weequahic students were the best in the land.

Our alumni association is a wonderful example of passing on one's legacy as previous generations of Weequahic "*give back*" to support the students currently at the high school. The alumni association has had a tremendous impact on the Weequahic of today. It has become an important resource to the high school as it provides students with opportunities that might not otherwise be available to them.

Besides the memories of the good old days, our most important accomplishments are with the students who currently attend Weequahic. For example, we have raised more than *\$400,000* for college scholarships, assisted in funding two French class trips to Paris, purchased instruments and uniforms for the marching band, provided funds to send Weequahic athletes to summer sports camps, provided a school-wide broadcast of the Obama inauguration, and, on a regular basis, sponsor many academic and athletic activities.

So you see, you can never underestimate the power of *dreams, visions, faith, trust, enthusiasm and the good intentions of a small of group of people*. Today we have become one of the most unique and successful urban high school alumni associations in Newark, in New Jersey, in the country!

And why not? It's in the venerable tradition of Weequahic. And isn't that the way it should be?