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An Adult Education

Though high school days seemed a lot more innocent 25 years ago, a former student finds that some things still haven't changed.

by **Toni L. Kamins**

Back to high school twenty-five years after graduation? Would anything be the same? "Wear a bullet-proof vest," one friend suggested, only half joking. Another warned that I'd find the once highly regarded Jamaica High School in dreadful shape academically.

Though I looked upon the visit with a mixture of nostalgia and trepidation, I was undaunted. I dusted off my yearbook, dug out my class ring, rummaged around for my G.O. button, and set out at 6:30AM with the dulcet tones of "School Days" drifting through the air from my half awake husband. First period started at 7:30 and I didn't want to be late.

Back on the hill today, the towering facade of Jamaica high came into view. And not a moment too soon. Like Scarlett O'Hara praying for a glimpse of an undamaged Tara, I was relieved to see the school columns, tower and 16-acre campus physically unchanged.

I climbed the school steps and just grinned, as one would upon seeing an old friend. From the base of the ever solid flagpole, I surveyed the surrounding area. Even Goose Pond, where we went ice skating, was still there.

In the lobby, amidst some fine examples of early twentieth century public school design and a striking WPA mural, I came face to face with

And even visiting students cut class. Today I skipped math -- never my favorite subject -- to patrol the halls and visit the cafeteria with the principal. Not merely an administrator, Pleener spends a lot of time, two-way radio in hand, walking through the halls and popping into classrooms. She is an authoritative presence despite her suburban-mom appearance

"We try to provide a safe haven for the kids here," she says. "I'm not telling you I have no discipline problem, but [violence] is what they get out there, so most of them don't bring it to school."

The guards, walkie-talkies, and ever present principal are features of the '90s. In

But let's backtrack a bit.

By 1967, when I entered Jamaica High School as a tenth-grader, my family had lived in the Jamaica section of Queens for over forty years. My maternal great-grandparents and grand-parents settled there after coming to the United States from Hungary and became an active part of Jamaica's growing Jewish community. My parents still live in nearby Briarwood and other family members live in neighboring communities. My mother, three aunts, and one sister are all Jamaica alumnae.

Some days I walked to school and met up with various friends and acquaintances who lived along the way, but most of the time a bunch of us took the E train to 169th street and Hillside Avenue. We congregated blissfully at the corner candy store before trudging up the long steep hill to school.

But the scene at the top of the subway stairs in 1995 was not the one from my childhood. The deterioration that plagues the streets of many

present day school reality.

What I worriedly presumed to be metal detectors were in fact attendance recorders. Students insert a magnetic ID card into the machine and their presence for the day is logged in. Had I had entered The Twilight Zone?

While one of the now ubiquitous security guards checked my identification, Barbara Pleener, the principal, greeted me and handed me my program card for the day.

Despite having spent three years of my life in this building I had to be guided to my first period class-- Leadership.

Mr. Heiss' students were working on an in-class project. Their assignment?

Break up into small groups and construct something useful for the kitchen out of a paper clip, cardboard, toothpicks, and a rubber band. "In Leadership", one student informed me, "we talk about self-esteem and responsibility and doing things in the community like re-cycling and volunteerism."

my day, the occasional teacher in the hall during change of period sufficed to keep students in check. We hardly saw our principal, the late Louis Schuker. Even discipline was meted out by the now-defunct Dean of Boys or Dean of Girls.

Gone too are academic, commercial, and general diplomas. Replaced by a single diploma, the change still provokes considerable debate among teachers and administrators at Jamaica.

And these days virtually all the students at Jamaica are black, a striking contrast to the school of my day which was about 75% white. (Back in the early 1970s, Hillcrest High School was built nearby, ostensibly to relieve Jamaica's overcrowding. But the result, intended or not, was to siphon off students from areas like Forest Hills, Kew Gardens, and Flushing to Hillcrest and change the racial mix at Jamaica).

The last thing on my sked today: The principal's Consultative Council, a small group of teachers, students, and administrators who

neighborhoods was much in evidence. The candy store, a one time fixture in many neighborhoods, was gone. The streets were dotted with homeless people. Back in the '60s they were not a regular feature of urban life.

The walk up the hill though, along 168th street, is legendary. And at 43 I found it a bit more difficult to scale than I had at 18.

April 5, 1968 was another day when the trek up the hill seemed particularly long. The day before, Martin Luther King, Jr. had been assassinated and a few of my friends feared some sort of disturbance. Racial tension in the city school system was running high. Bob Dylan may have known that "the times...[were] a changin'", but it would be years before I would grasp the full import of what was happening. By the time many more April days would come and go such upheaval would become commonplace.

But there was no riot at Jamaica. A group of black students stood in silent protest; many white students were ashamed to

I was baffled. I thought back to 1969, and my "Problems of Democracy" class. The war in Vietnam, the Six-Day war in the Mideast, and the divisive 1968 New York City teachers' strike raised formidable issues for all of us.

Today Mary (16), Merrie (17), and Jeanette (17) set about to solve the problem.

They folded, attached, experimented, suggested. After some negotiating we came up with a toaster. I say "we" because by the time the project was complete I was as engaged as they were.

Classes on personal finance, band, dance, English, and French followed. The Foreign Language department has been replaced by the politically correct "Second Languages," though the door retains the old sign.

In the library, where computers have replaced some of the card catalogues, a group of students is preparing for an essay competition. And if I didn't remember it until just now, Jamaica High was where I learned many of the basic research skills

regularly meet to discuss school policy issues. Dev Parekh, a junior and an honor student, wants to study law, or maybe computer engineering; honor student Cheddi Lowe wants to go to the Air Force Academy or MIT, and honor student Jeanette Weir hopes to go to the University of Pennsylvania and study economics. I have no doubt that they will get where they want to go.

Have things changed? Sure. As budgets undergo deeper cuts, fewer teachers teach larger numbers of students. But the school is still trying to give these kids the tools they need to succeed. They need them as much as I did. Maybe even more.

Oh, one more thing. I got to eat lunch in the teachers' lounge.

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look black students in the eye. I think we all protested something that day, whether we knew it or not.

I rely on in my daily work.

But some things don't change: Now, as then, some teachers stimulate while others fail to engage.

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