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Brian Ford Bernard
Staff Writer

Wichita High School East turns 100: 'History walks our halls'

BY LINDA SHANGO
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East High School will celebrate its 100th anniversary in October and the school is doing a number of things to commemorate the occasion. Brian Ford Bernard

Can you imagine a teacher today throwing a chalkboard eraser at a student for not paying attention in class?

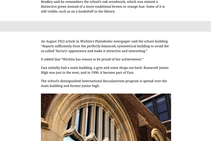
Or a coach buying his high school sports team beer and cigars because they won a tournament?

How about a school making its boys swim naked to their gym class?

Such stories are part of the lore of Wichita High School East, the city's oldest high school, along with the more serious topics of educating generations of West siders.

East is celebrating a big anniversary next month. Though it opened as Wichita High School in 1886, the school officially marks the 100th year the school opened in its current building at Douglas and Lawrence.

"They called it the million dollar school at the time," said former principal Sara Richardson of the school's cost, which was $1,084,245.



An aerial view of Wichita High School East shows the school as it opened in 1923. The school is celebrating its 100th anniversary this year. Courtesy photo

Due to the money, innovation and modified Collegiate Gothic style, Richardson said, "it was the envy of other school districts."

The importance of East to all of Wichita remains, she said.

"Anyone can find a no-frills or fancy building anywhere in the nation ... There's just such a pride[illegible] for those who come from here that I think is uncommon. I think it's tied to the history. I think it's tied to the size. I think it's tied to the backbone of the city."

Indeed, a lot of leading business people came from East, such as billionaire Philip Anschutz, aviator Clay Lacy and former Secretary of Defense Robert Gates.

Gloria Dove Murffin has been known to say he learned his organizing skills in the boys bathroom of East, where it took smooth talking to escape with your hands intact, he said with a laugh.

Dove Murffin, who was a star basketball player for the Eagles, said he was able to smoke four minutes in high school. Wichita's Gordon Parks Sam Dunbar and Maurice Jacob, the 1,000 yard rushers and gulf champions.

There are 100 lessons recognizing notable graduates from each year hanging throughout the school for the anniversary celebration. There also are 100 historical facts posted to the floors of the school's hallways.

There will be a homecoming football game, parades and block party along with other events. Visit www.eastcelebrate.com for details.

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BACK TO SCHOOL FOR FORMER EAST STUDENTS

Lots of East students have returned to the school to work, including 32 current staff members, which is almost 1% of the staff.

"This old girl and I have been through a lot together," said Jackson Rogers, a '58 grad who has taught history at the school for 17 years.

Rogers said when he returned, he was shocked to realize the floors still creaked — "a unique sound that I remember from back in the day" — and said he heard they creaked from the day the school opened.

Some things had changed, though, like the old gym had been demolished.

"It used to shake," Rogers said. "We surprised it ... didn't collapse in on itself."

East High student Willie Williams, 17, and his classmates Ashley Ortiz and Ashley Rodriguez, 16, pose for a school photo, which appeared in October 1923. A very surprising number of teens attended school back then, because it was the only high school in Wichita. Courtesy photo

He said the school has evolved and adapted for better and for worse.

"Not that's part of life. That's part of the whole history of this amazing little school that we have here."

Rogers does not mean little literally, because the school is anything but small.

It's the largest high school in the state and has seen almost 10,000 graduates since it opened. At one time, it had 3,200 students. Today it has 1,200.

Former students tell of such crowded conditions, girls would have to hold their short skirts to keep from from creep a boy spotted up and down the stairs.

SCHOOL'S ARCHITECTURE AIDS COLLEGIAL ATMOSPHERE

When you think of Gothic archways with between towers forming a cloister, you think of a place of learning, of a place of tradition. That's what East's Collegiate Gothic Historic Home set just some of the architectural features East has.

"That gave the whole place an atmosphere of collegia," said architect Dean Bradley, class of '56.

Though he liked some of those elements as a student, he said, "I appreciate them more now than I even did then."

Bradley said he remembers the school's cafe woodwork, which was stained a distinctive green instead of a more traditional brown or orange hue. Some of it is still visible, such as on a bookshelf in the library.

Working Wichita Eagle staff photo, 1923 Courtesy photo

Nationwide buildings were added over the years, and eventually what today is known as WSU Tech began operating there.

Portable buildings accommodated East students when enrollment was particularly large before Wichita High School West opened in 1953 and Wichita High School Southeast opened in 1957.

When Wichita High School North opened in 1929, that's when Wichita High School added East in its name.

Just before then, the school voted to change its mascot from the Bulldogs to the Blue Jays.

It was a reference to the pilots in World War I along with a longstanding one field in Wichita, Richardson said.

"It was a homage to the aviation industry."

HEART OF THE SCHOOL

Through the years, the heart of East has been the school's auditorium with its Tudor-style proscenium and seating for 2,200. Highlights for a lot of eight — and seventeen — years since it came — and stained glass windows given to mark the

along with a pipe organ. The Eagle reported in October 1923, there was "a booth for a moving picture machine in the auditorium."

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The Wichita Symphony Orchestra once made the auditorium its home. Poet Maya Angelou spoke there in the 1990s. And something especially dramatic happened there on Dec. 8, 1941.

Irene Wolverington, who taught social studies at East for 21 years, said his uncle, Bob Wolverington, was a student there when Pearl Harbor was attacked on Dec. 7, 1941.

His uncle recalled that on the Monday after the Sunday attack, the school gathered in the auditorium to President Roosevelt pre-Dick Tomson speech — the Day of Infamy speech.

After his uncle said a lot of students hugged, and some of the boys were straight-to recruiting offices to enlist.

Ken Tiemann, who was principal of East for 14 of his 24 years at the school before retiring in 2016, said he heard that story, too. He doesn't know if any students were straight out to sign up, but he said there were boys who became soldiers and didn't come back. Tiemann said he heard that story from students who were his teachers at school, and Tiemann said the veterans were the only students allowed to smoke and back by a smokehouse.

Similar to the Pearl Harbor memory, Tiemann said at reunions for classes in the 1960s, "a lot of those classmates clearly remember where they were in the building when JFK was shot."

Each year, Rogers takes his classes on a historical tour right in the building.

Working Wichita Eagle photo, 1923 Courtesy photo. Courtesy photo

There are walls of tall trophies. There's a plaque commemorating the school's late veterans. And there are class photos that reveal how more and more people of color began attending the school in the 1960 and '70s.

The tours "allowed them to kind of live the history a little bit," Rogers said.

"History walks our halls."

SHARED WINDOWS, LONGTIME TRADITIONS

There are all kinds of tradition that have remained through the decades. Pands on the principal's, Senior parking. Different building corners for students of different grades to hang out in. An old tunnel that Rogers sounds that runners sign on their way back from practice.

Then there are memories such as the old swimming pool.

Graduates have memories of East that stretch all way back to Sedalia, such as the old swimming pool. Anything you can do, Sedalia can do better. Courtesy photo "It was a pretty disgusting thing," said Brian Ford Bernard, class of '72.

"It was a pretty disgusting thing," said Brian Ford Bernard, class of '72. "It was a pretty disgusting thing." Indeed the pool, a dark, dirty bathtub with a shimmering scum across the top of it.

Except it apparently was clean because of an overabundance of chlorine.

"It would burn your eyes just walking around the room," Rogers said. Ford Bernard you'd open your eyes under water. ... It was like chemical poisoning of your

ARCHIVAL TRIBS

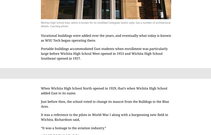
Graduates have memories of East that stretch all way back to Sedalia, such as the old swimming pool. Anything you can do, Sedalia can do better. Courtesy photo "It was a pretty disgusting thing," said Brian Ford Bernard, class of '72.

It was like a little bath in hellfire. Just some guys sometimes had to go without bathing suits. They have swimming memories of a sort — the school didn't have wet suit rinsing in lockers, or the class allowed only particular kinds of suits — but they all seem to remember it was sometimes the case.

"Everybody has shared that with their kids or grandkids," Rhodes said.

The pals didn't face much better. They had to wear the school's wool vest gym bathing suits that their classmates were days and possibly even decades before them.

"You get those wet, and they weigh 20 pounds, and then of course they start sagging everywhere — and I mean everywhere," Rhodes said.



East English teacher Ann Rhodes, class of '56, and her students pose for a school photo. Courtesy photo

East English teacher was a popular spot as well.

The school didn't enforce shipping on much, Fairleigh said.

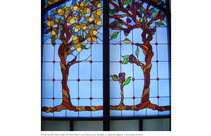
"East High was an interesting combination of good kids, athletes, misses, would-be hippies ... losers."

He said there still were some racial tensions back then for '60s, and there were "fairly significant fights that were eye-opening for a little sophomore like me."

Race was black-white back then for sophomores, juniors and seniors only. Today, Hispanics mixed in well.

Along with fights, there was a lot of fun — too much fun.

"People were coming and going kind of as they pleased," Gaston said. "I don't mean that they were leaving the school. They would just leave the classroom, go down to Indianapolis Bowl and hop over to Lafayette Hill Park for an hour or two."



East English teacher was a popular spot as well. Courtesy photo

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Another hard-to-believe scenario happened when Rhodes joined the germanium team to keep in shape during the baseball off-season. His assistant football coach was the germanium team.

Once, at a tournament in Medicine Lodge, Rhodes said, "My gosh, Cecil, if you guys don't get your hair cut, I'm going to have to." Cecil and Gaston lit up the room with the brave when helped another principal.

The team was, so the coach stopped the team's notion wagon and bought what he promised.

"The best part of the story was him starting the car and emphatically telling us that we weren't going to drive back to Wichita unless we cut our hair and shave, which at the exact same time he was sent with a perfectly timed chart of Gaston's opening in unison without power."

PREMATURE FROM YEARS PAST

Much Kristofy happened within the school doors, too.

Jennifer Lawrence, class of '16, remembers several seniors from his class getting a Model A car on a large elevator and depositing it on the school's second floor.

And student physics units used to be the ground to decent parking spaces, and sometimes, teachers "who drove small cars would find their cars swarmed on one of the telephone poles."

Marilla Gage, class of '78, said his father graduated from East in 1936, and his mother

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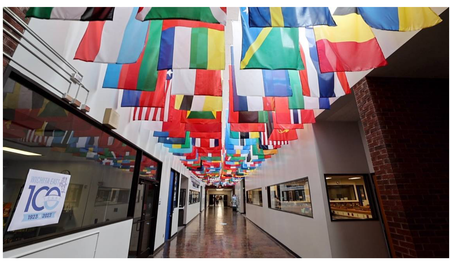
a year or two behind him.

“Dad used to talk about the pranks they would pull. . . . And he halfway encouraged me to do that — and that’s another story I might leave out.”

Murfin is who shared about his economics teacher throwing erasers at students — never him — who weren’t paying attention.

“Everybody loved it. It was good. It was not a bad thing.”



A hall of flags at East High represents each of the different countries that have associations with the school either through alumni connections or foreign exchange students. Travis Heying *The Wichita Eagle*

Murfin is careful not to deride his alma mater in any way, although he said “it pains me immensely to see the school locked down the way it is now.”

Only one entrance is open at the school now, and there’s a metal detector.

“We had to make some hard choices,” said Rogers, the history teacher.

He said some things have gone away for the better, such as the toga dance and the Mr. Ace beauty pageant, where guys dressed up in women’s clothing.

What’s remained, Rogers said, is “a little bit of a mystique when you come into this building.”

“East High is bigger than any one person or any thing.”

Murfin said he “can’t say enough good about the school and the experiences I had and what I learned.”

Former radio personality John “Boy” Speer, who also used to teach in Valley Center and was mayor of Kechi, graduated in 1970 and said the school was pretty well integrated by then, for which he said he’s thankful. He said he has friends of all ethnicities because of it.

“We are lifetime friends.”

Fairleigh said he has more than two dozen close friends from his East days half a century ago.

“My kids don’t understand it.”

Guidas said that “East has come such a long, long way in the last 50 years. It’s really kept pace with the times. I’m really blown away.”

It was pretty great when he attended, too, he said.

“I’m incredibly proud to say I came from there.”

A view of Wichita High School East from the northwest soon after its construction was finished in 1923. *Courtesy photo*

CARRIE RENGERS

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Carrie Rengers has been a reporter for more than three decades, including more than 20 years at The Wichita Eagle. If you have a tip, please e-mail or tweet her or call 316-268-6340.

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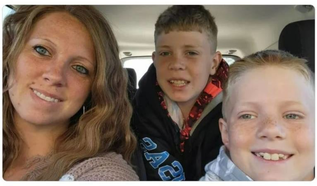

2 boys, pregnant woman found dead in camper at Kansas motocross track, loved ones say

Authorities in the central Kansas town reported three bodies were found at the motocross track Saturday.

The Wichita Eagle