

## Lifestyles

# You can go back

By *Sandy Weigens*

It's been more than three decades since I walked out of Wagar High School as a graduate. Since then, I have often wondered what my fellow grads were up to, how their lives have progressed.

In September of 2001, I saw the video of a West Hill High class reunion. Although I hardly knew a soul at that party, I felt their excitement and wanted to experience that for myself. I wanted to not just go to such a party, but to put one together. While there had been Wagar reunions, none had been organized for my year. I felt that Wagar's class of '73 should have its own reunion.

I figured that the logical time to have it would be 2003, the 30th anniversary of our graduation. Finding the grads of 1973 would be tough. In my day, Wagar had a population of more than 1,700. My class alone had nearly 350 grads, most of whom were probably scattered to the four corners of the world. Many must have taken the 401 back in 1976 when the PQ came to power.

I dusted off my copy of the "Prelude", the Wagar yearbook. This was to become an indispensable tool to establish lists, get backgrounds and correct spelling, and as a source of photographs of the grads and the teachers.

I knew that to pull off this reunion, I would depend heavily on computers and the Internet. Being a computer professional by day and a PC geek by night, I set up systems to automate the whole process and a database to gather the grads' names and addresses that I hoped would flood in.

My next step was to look on the Internet. "Googling" the name "Wagar" yielded more than 20,000 results. Searching for "Wagar High School" narrowed the field to under 500. The first "hit" was a website called "wagaralumni.com", run by Darryl Levine, a much younger grad. There, I found an almost complete '73 class list. I dashed off a message to all whose e-mail addresses were posted there, expressing my intentions and soliciting their participation.

My friend and classmate Gary Perlman, who also works with computers, suggested that I put together our own reunion website as a central clearinghouse for information, to post messages and swap photographs. I did so in October 2001. I posted the first message, and Gary the second.

That's how it stayed until mid-December of 2003 when I called two of my Wagar classmates, Judy-Gail Adelstein and Della Druick, to take them up on their offer to help. That was the real beginning of our reunion, and the seeds of its organizing committee. I then invited anyone willing to get involved to come to my house for coffee and dessert, to get the ball rolling.



The organizing committee: (left to right) Back row: Bernie Lebovits, Gary Perlman, Sandy Weigens, David Segelstein, Howard Gliserman. Middle row: Mayda Klaiman, Leesa Berger, Della Druick. Front row: Barbara Shuster, Rena Goldberg, Judy-Gail Adelstein, Joe Schactman.

Sunday came, and so did Gary, Della, Judy-Gail and Rena Goldberg. And although we spent more time catching up than planning, we were on our way. The next week, classmates with whom I never exchanged two words in high school joined us, including Bernie Lebovits, Leesa Berger and Janice Levine. Layah Long represented us in Toronto.

Each Sunday, committee members arrived at my home at 7:15 p.m., but we would only get down to business after at least an hour's joyful schmoozing. Then we would crowd around my coffee table and roll up our sleeves.

The biggest task was contacting our grads. To our pleasant surprise, more than half of the 250 grads we found still lived here in Montreal! That put to rest any thought about having the reunion anywhere but here.

The next big issue was the date. By the time the committee gelled, it was February 2004. We thought that a long weekend would be best and we finally settled on Victoria Day, May 22, giving us only three and a half months.

Right from the start, the committee wanted to keep costs down. The suggested venues were hotel banquet halls, restaurants with party rooms, and Wagar itself. We decided to charge \$55 a person.

By mid-March, we still hadn't decided between a hotel or Wagar. Some of us were afraid that after three decades, the old alma mater on Parkhaven Avenue would be shabbier and smaller than we remembered. We needed to see it for ourselves. As the committee descended on the place, our fears evaporated. The lobby was exactly as we left it in 1973. The gym was as big and bright as ever, minus the chin-up bars and climbing ropes. The classrooms seemed to still ring from our teenage laughter; the cafeteria evoked memories of lunch lines, skipped

classes and card games. The hallways, auditorium, washrooms... it was all intact. The only things that were missing were the "baracks", the temporary classrooms at the back of the school. They were a recess-time refuge, where some of us would sneak a cigarette or a kiss between classes. Once we saw the old place, there was no doubt: the reunion had to be there. We delegated a couple of people to book the date and close the deal.

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# Education

## Wager

From page E3

By April, there were 2,500 messages posted on our website and May saw another 1,300. People posted thoughts about high school, places, confessions, regrets and accomplishments. We read of memories of riding a Borden's milk truck on its daily rounds, being chased out of a Caldwell bakery by its broomstick-swinging owner, the price of chocolate bars and comic books, Bailey's bakery, nights at Westminster Park, Orange Julep and Donut King.

We all grew up within a couple of miles of each other, mostly in Cote St. Luc, with a smattering in Hampstead, N.D.G. and Montreal West. Most of us attended the same nursery and elementary schools. Judy-Gail dug through her parents' basement, found a class picture from first grade, and posted it on our website. Then another was submitted, and another. Very soon, we had every single group photo from every class ever attended by any of us, complete with students' names.

Other items were submitted, like a five-cent bus ticket, kindergarten report cards, Expo '67 passports, album covers and concert tickets.

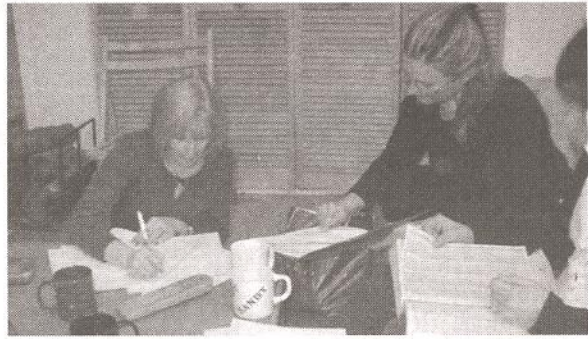
Organizing the reunion has been an exercise in pure chutzpah. I have made more cold calls than I ever imagined, picking up the phone to speak to people who I either haven't seen in over three decades, or with whom I have never talked. And every time, it turned out to be really nice.

I polled the psychiatrists and psychologists among my classmates, asking them to explain the phenomenon of reunions and the explosive popularity of the message board. As one voice, they all said that this process was the opportunity to relive the past without the stresses of growing up, to be a child once more, but with the experience of an adult. They said that it even gave us the chance to make amends for the wrongs we did and cleanse ourselves of the guilt we carried for all these decades; sort of like doing it all over again, the right way, this time.

Of the 338 official class of '73 grads, we knew that some had passed away. We were determined to acknowledge them. The committee made it known that any post-reunion surplus funds would be donated to charity in memory of our lost classmates and teachers. We selected the Children's Wish Foundation. The cheques and cash started to roll in. At the latest tally, we cleared the \$3,600 mark, a goal we set to mark 50 times "chai", the traditional Jewish number that symbolizes life. Dr. Robert Notkin, one generous grad, offered to make up any shortfall to that amount.

We thought we'd start the weekend early with an "ice breaker" on Friday night. We expected a crowd of 20 to 30, but more than 60 people showed up, still arriving at midnight.

The main event was on Saturday. With the imagination and efforts of our décor crew and a handful of others who pitched in, we managed to transform Wagar. Spread around the lobby walls was a timeline depicting moments in history interspersed with Wagar events. Westminster Park was a big part of our teenage summer evenings, so we recreated it in the gym with paper, paint, park bench and makeshift sand. We even had a mock



Busy looking for Wagar grads.

"162" bus stop. On the far side was our version of the Orange Julep, complete with cars. Strung between basketball hoops were clotheslines laden with peasant blouses, tie-dyed t-shirts, jeans, checked lumber jackets, the uniforms of our youth. On cocktail tables were centrepieces made from platform shoes spray-painted gold. Everywhere you looked were photos of grads and teachers, pictures of icons and sights from back in the 70's, movie posters and signs from the era.

### The big night

I got to the school early that morning, but I never had a chance to change into the nice clothes I brought for the party. The next thing I knew, it was 7:30 and there was a lobby full of people lined up to check in — nearly 200 people, all reliving their youth, seeing old friends and favourite teachers for the first time in decades, not knowing which way to turn first. Mix in some hors d'oeuvres, drinks and lots of 70s hits and you start to get the picture.

Stories were told, teachers were thanked, pictures were pulled out of wallets and purses. There was dancing, laughing, crying; all the things a reunion could be. And it was far better than anyone dared to imagine.

And after what seemed like a couple of blinks and many hugs, it was all over. The last chords of "Stairway to Heaven" faded out and the lights came up.

We didn't let the grads leave empty-handed. Each person got a "loot bag" consisting of a Class of '73 t-shirt rolled up into a reunion coffee mug, which was stuffed with candies reminiscent of the 70's.

We compiled all the names, addresses, high school memories and brief biographies into a "memory book" which was given to each grad. And just for good measure (and to make the Torontonians jealous), we threw in a half-dozen fresh Montreal bagels.

The success of the reunion and our ability to pull it off in a very short time could only have been done with current technology. We searched the Internet for people. Canada411.com was helpful in finding phone numbers. Whowhere.com got us e-mail addresses. Canadapost.com filled in missing postal codes. Our contact list was an electronic database. With a couple of mouse clicks, messages were instantly dispatched to hundreds of grads. Much of our registration was done through an on-line form which doubled as an information-gathering tool for our Memory Book. Hundreds of pictures and thousands of messages were a click away on two websites. But when all the electrons settled and the screens cleared, it was good old human contact that made it work. The spontaneous phone calls and backyard barbecues that still go on today are purely person-to-person. And there is no computer program anywhere that can simulate or transmit the smiles, handshakes, hugs and tears of joy that we all felt at the reunion of Wagar High School's Class of 1973. ■