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Downers Grove South's Class of 1969 celebrates 50th reunion

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DOWNERS GROVE – The Beatles were breaking up. The Vietnam War was raging. The Woodstock music festival was held in upstate New York. Civil rights remained an important issue.

Yes, the tumultuous year of 1969 had a lot of memories.

Many of those memories came flooding back last weekend when some members of the Downers Grove South High School Class of 1969 gathered for a 50th reunion.

Sixty members of that graduating class – which numbered 460 – gathered at Carriage Greens Country Club in Darien for a luncheon Sept. 22. About 20 spouses not in the class also attended.

Some alumni – and others not at the luncheon – had attended the homecoming pep rally and football game Sept. 20. They toured the school the following day, which offered them the opportunity to see the renovations underway at the school.

Two even marched in the homecoming parade, reunion organizer Robin Emmons said.

"It doesn't feel like 50 years," Emmons said. "I don't know if it's as you get older, time is more fleeting. The sad thing is in the past few weeks, two classmates passed away."

There was a special place setting to remember the 60 classmates who have passed away, their yearbook photos displayed on a chair.

Emmons said she noticed that the cliques of high school have faded.

"You get to this age, nobody cares anymore," Emmons, 67, said. "I feel like I'm meeting people for the first time. It's like, 'Wow, I wish I had known you.'"

She enjoyed the school tour.

"The school was so different, but we can see the parts that are the same. We didn't have a pool back then. Some of the original linoleum is there. One guy did find his locker, tried (the combination) and it didn't work," Emmons said with a laugh.

Not many of his classmates were drafted for Vietnam, Fred Ceranek said. He's now "just another retired guy" who was "lucky he didn't get drafted."

One friend, Ceranek said, "could have used the Army to straighten him out."

John Simmons, with a balding dome at age 69, said his hair was much longer 50 years ago when he protested against the Vietnam War.

"His hair was curly," wife Laura said.

Simmons said he "was interested in the hippies, but I sort of retreated when I found out they believed in begging but they didn't believe in working. I saw that as incompatible."

He did agree with them on one issue: "I knew the Vietnam War was BS."

Simmons said he had "mixed emotions" when the Beatles split up. "I wish it had been a more peaceful breakup."

At a table of memorabilia, David Sauer, 68, scoured a photo of the a cappella choir he sang with in the 1968-69 school year.

Asked for his thoughts on the half-century milestone, he smiled and said, "I made it."

"It's been a sort of up-and-down journey, but I'm still surviving," the resident of Noblesville, Indiana, said.

Sauer's first time back at Downers Grove South High School brought back memories of "when one of the stage curtains caught on fire and we had evacuate the school. I guess one of the stage lights was too close to it."

Sauer drove from Indiana, a cakewalk compared with educator Nancy Sairsingh, whose maiden name was Parson. She lives in Moscow and was back in America to attend a relative's wedding in St. Louis.

"It's an amazing culture," she said of Russia, where she's lived with her family since 1993. "I don't like to see the two countries aren't in the best of relations now. I hope for the best."

Asked if it feels like 50 years, David Sloat of Springfield smiled and said, "it doesn't. Well, it does in my knees."

Sloat's favorite memories are of his classmates: "I really enjoy seeing the people. And you miss those who are gone."

Looking back, he said 1969 "had a lot of turbulence in the political environment."

"And, right before that, the shootings, RFK and Martin Luther King. You don't try to remember, but it comes back at you. The war was a tough thing."

Mike Block was 20 and said he was not being drafted in 1970 "because they wanted the 19-year-olds."

He fondly recalls driving his speedy AMC Javelin around town. And he won't forget the warm welcome he received at Downers Grove South.

"I moved into Downers Grove from another town the first day of high school. So I knew nobody," he said. "By my senior year, I had a lot of friends."