

Of Bomb Drills and Bell-bottoms: Memories of Tolland's Schools

In December 2012, Ian Polun, social studies coordinator for the Tolland school system, asked some Tolland High School teachers who grew up in town to share their memories with current students.

Among those who took part in the wide-ranging discussion were art teacher Helen Malchow, English teachers James MacArthur and Ivy Morrison, guidance counselor Caitlin Foran and physical education teachers Mary-Beth Blauvelt and Amy Steed.

Here are some excerpts.

What were Tolland schools like?

MacArthur, a 1976 THS graduate: I started first grade at the old Hicks building. They moved me into about three different classrooms in my first two weeks, and by the time they moved me into the third one, I just broke down in tears, crying. I remember walking to school. I lived right near the green. I remember John Glenn was flying around, orbiting the Earth for the first time. It was so exciting.

Malchow, 1976: There were cows in our front yard at the high school. There were no [traffic] lights in Tolland. The first light in Tolland was put in there at the Tolland Green in, oh boy, I think in 1977, '78...It was a very rural community.

Morrison, 1972: I have a feeling that the year they were bouncing Mr. MacArthur around it was because they built what turned into Parker School. When they first built that, it was called Meadowbrook. They were working on it when I was in third grade, and halfway through my third year, the fourth graders moved into the little piece that was ready...The teachers packed boxes and each kid got a box and they walked down the hill from Hicks and moved in.

Malchow: Did [Tolland students] go to Rockville at one point, also?

Morrison: One year [they] went to Rockville, one year went to Ellington, the next year went to Rockville, the next year went to Ellington. So you could be living in Tolland and have kids in three different school systems.

What are some of your most vivid memories?

Morrison: When I was really little, we used to have those air raid drills.

MacArthur: Yeah, "duck and cover."

Morrison: If you read in your history books, way back in the day in the '60s, during the Cuban Missile Crisis, they used to ring the – whatever kind of alarm it was that was up on top of Hicks. Life had to stop: if you were driving, you pulled off to the side of the road and sat there. If you were home, you went inside, closed the doors and windows. If it was nighttime, you shut off all

the lights. If you were in school, we used to sit under our desks – like that’s going to help you if a bomb goes off.

Foran, 2004: Well, I do remember September 11th. I was a sophomore in Mrs. [Nancy] McGrath’s Spanish III classroom. And I remember she got a phone call, and her face fell and she was like, “Hold on, class.” So she went and talked outside and she came back into the class and told us, and I think she rolled a TV in and we watched it.

What changes have they seen in the school system?

Morrison: We could smoke in school. Not in the bathrooms. Just in the courtyard.

Morrison: There were real prisoners in the Tolland jail, and we used to hang out outside and look in the windows at them.

Blauvelt, 1978: There was no middle school [in the center of town.] There was nothing. That was just plain field.

MacArthur: Now, this would probably only apply to Ivy and myself, but, I’m not sure when, but [there was] some time, at the high school, seventh or eighth grade, before we were allowed to wear blue jeans – denim – to school. And girls, you probably had to wear dresses?

Morrison: Dresses, yeah.

MacArthur: You couldn’t wear pants at all.

Morrison: I remember that.

MacArthur: And then the ’70s came and then forget about that. We could wear whatever we wanted to, and we did.

Malchow: Hiphuggers, they were probably lower than your hiphuggers.

MacArthur: Bell-bottoms.

Malchow: Bell-bottoms that you almost fell over in.

Blauvelt: Halter tops.

Why did you come back to teach in Tolland?

Steed, Class of 1986: I always said when I teach, I want to come back here. I loved growing up in Tolland. I had a great experience with my teachers here.

MacArthur: I thought it would be a nice place to teach. I’ve been here 28 years...It’s been a very good run.”