

SHS to Celebrate 50th Annual Performance of the 8th Grade Play

In 2015, SHS will celebrate the 50th anniversary of the annual 8th Grade play. The inaugural SHS production, which took place in 1966, was called "The Year the Yankees Lost the Pennant" as opposed to "Damn Yankees, because the school prevented usage of the word "damn." The 8th Grade Play replaced Signal Hill's annual pageant, a tradition which started in 1920.

Pam (Gregory) Meinders performed in the first-ever 8th Grade play as the newspaper reporter (2nd lead-female). And she fondly recalled the preparation involved. "We had quite a bit of parental involvement," she said. "We worked on our own costumes. I remember wearing a bright orange suit. We had musical numbers. Mr. McCrady (former SHS band director Donald T. McCrady) was there with the band and the music. We had play practice after school."

Alex Urban directed the play and earned high marks from Meinders. "Mr. Urban instilled the love of acting and entertaining," Meinders said. "He fostered an interest and desire in theatre and brought out our creativity. He gave the kids confidence."

Meinders said participating in the first-ever play production at SHS was special.

"I didn't realize we were going to be a groundbreaking tradition," Meinders said with a laugh. "It's definitely a special feeling. I appreciate that we were the first play and the importance of passing on the heritage of it. The play has continued and enriched the tradition at Signal Hill School. It includes the neighborhood. It reaches out to the community. The play is well-respected and they do outstanding work."

Pam's husband, Dr. Bob Meinders, played a security guard and performed in the chorus. He has vivid memories of that first play. "As a young guy, I remember long hours of practice," he said. "Mr. Urban, the director, demanded punctuality and pushed for perfection. Ultimately we were proud of our production and had fun in the process."

Diane (Toberman) Murphey, meanwhile, had the lead role as Lola and also cherished the entire experience. "It was incredibly exciting," she said. "It was very exciting to be the first class to do the play. That was a great, great memory. It was great fun doing it. Not having done anything like that before, it was wonderful to do a complete production of a play. It made it really very special. I really enjoyed it. I think everyone in it enjoyed it." Murphey marvels that SHS has continued the tradition for 50 years. "It's exciting," she said. "I think it's a great thing that Signal Hill does, a great tradition that they've kept on. I think that's what makes it unique is that they were able to keep going with that tradition as other schools make cutbacks. I'm so glad this is one particular thing that did not have to be dropped. It really says a lot for the community and the area. I'm just tickled that it's been able to go on so long."

Both Meinders and Murphey said they definitely will consider attending the 50th.

Flashing forward to the present, Stacey Henke has directed the play since 2011, and also experienced it as an 8th grade student and as a parent. Needless to say, she is very honored and excited to direct the 50th annual rendition. "Keeping this tradition alive for 50 years is nothing short of amazing," she said. "We have been able to accomplish this only through the continuing

support of our administration, faculty, staff, and community. The 8th grade musical is truly a labor of love. I took on this challenge because I wanted to play a part in keeping this tradition alive. I know first hand what a wonderful experience it can be, and the valuable lessons that can be learned from it. I want current Signal Hill students to be able to have this same incredible experience.”

Long-time SHEF board member Steve Suess directed 13 SHS plays from 1973-1985, starting with “Fiddler on the Roof” and concluding with “Anything Goes”, and offered his insight into the 50th production. “First, I am thrilled that SHS still regards the 8th grade play as a viable part of the school’s curriculum and mission,” he said. “In the mid-70’s the School Board changed the play from an extra-curricular activity to a co-curricular activity. That has continued for 50 years and says a great deal about the traditions and values of the school and community. Celebrating 50 years of the 8th grade play underscores the uniqueness of the school and the community it serves.”

Suess also noted the play's many benefits. “Unlike any other activity offered by the school, the 8th grade play represents the importance of fine arts play in our lives,” Suess said. “The annual production is a collaborative effort among many members of the school community who value fine arts. In addition, the 8th grade play teaches character traits like respect, responsibility, perseverance and teamwork.”

Both Henke and Suess hope to have members of the Class of 1966 involved in the celebration and expect No. 50 to generate an all-around high level of interest.

“I think it is a wonderful idea, and I have already talked to a couple members of the class who are excited and want to help,” Suess said. “Because the annual 8th grade play has touched generations of Warriors, I believe the 50th celebration will generate great interest. It will serve as a grand homecoming.”

“I hope that the 50th Anniversary Musical will attract the attention of many Signal Hill alumni and bring them back to reminisce and share their experiences,” added Henke. “It would be special to get as many alumni from the 1966 class, as well as all of the other 49 years, to show up in celebration of this grand occasion!”