

Freshmen Orientation.... To Life

By Jim Meil

Bridging to high school from grade school, G9 from G8, is a rite of passage, a coming of age.

For the Class of 1970, it occurred in the summer of 1966. It was true for me. And for those of us lucky enough to go to St. Joe's it was a big step forward from adolescence to adulthood.

Unlike those going to public and community high schools, we really would see a diverse student body. St. Joe was not an "Our Town" kind of high school.

The draw for Joe's stretched from the Cuyahoga River to way far east. Into Lake County, and down to Cleveland Heights, Shaker, and maybe points farther south than that. Not much farther north though. In the St Joe student mix, the city kids encountered the suburbanites, and even saw distant yokels from where the earth reached its outer edge, where maps of the known world ended: Mentor, Ohio.

I was one of those Mentor kids. During the school year we took the Mentor bus, which could be another adventure. Especially walking across the naked windswept plain that surrounded Eddie DeBartolo's Great Lakes Mall, when the January temperatures of 5 degrees would get an extra boost from a 20 knot breeze to deliver up a 25 degree-below-zero wind chill, but that's another story. But this story is about the summer, encountering new and different people, and widening one's horizons.

I was a reasonably good student, fairly bright, and qualified to be part of a group selected for "Honors Math." Maybe not as wonderful as it sounds. Because it meant that from June to August 1966 we were committed (compelled?) to take the first half of Algebra I in summer school, and then the second half the following summer of 1967. Further implications: swap in school, swap out job; swap in homework, swap out beach, pool, and girls. Swap in Mr. Pawlowski (a very fine teacher by the way), swap out



Jim in 1970



Jim today



Johnny Powers, Moose Cholak and Big Time Wrestling on TV. And swap in...the moms' car pool to get us back and forth to summer school. Remember, this was a daily round trip Mentor to 18491 Lake Shore Boulevard after all. A solid 20 or so miles. Not walking distance. No Mentor Bus. No RTA, or CTS, or ETS.

The people in our car pool rotated a bit, and memory has faded a bit. I seem to remember Pete Fries, Ron Sukalac, Chuck Rankin, Larry Mannion, and Mike Monasky as the regulars. I also remember that Mrs. Fries, Peter's mom, was so very nice, she let us take control of the radio dial on the ride. WHK 1420, WKYC 1100, but best of all, WIXY 1260. Rolling Stones Paint It Black, Tommy James My Baby Does the Hanky Panky (really, what's that?), Donovan Sunshine Superman... the time and miles flew by.

But if class ended early, or the ride was late, there was time to kill. And we would kill it in the library. Where else? Nerds and books, and maybe some time to get the homework done. Our car pool group chose to sit next to the entry door in a pretty much empty space EXCEPT FOR...Four guys in the far corner... As far away from the door, and from us, as you could get. And these weren't other grade school grads. These guys were... Old. Big. Tough. Seniors? Maybe. Probably not refugees from Advanced Placement Physics. Summer school to graduate? Maybe. They had cornered the world's last remaining supply of Brylcreem, too. Why would people wear leather coats In July? These guys looked tough.

So we minded our own business. No problem, they minded theirs. The first few days, maybe a week or so, everything went fine. Some days our ride was on time, somedays we waited, but the "seniors" were always there, in the far corner.

One day we sat, doing our homework, waiting on our ride, and the oddest thing happened. We were getting wet. What? It was a sunny day. We were inside, in the library. It couldn't be raining inside. We looked above, but there was no plumbing leak. How could we be getting wet? And furthermore, why were the "seniors" laughing so loud? Cracking up something fierce. What could be so funny? The Central Limit Theorem? Avogadro's number? The three laws of thermodynamics? Couldn't figure it out. But we had $2(3x - 7) + 4(3x + 2) = 6(5x + 9) + 3$ facing us, and with the task of finding X, it was back to work. But darn it. We kept getting wet. It kept raining, in droplets. And our cross-library scholars kept laughing...

One day our ride was way late, so we kept working, And then we happened to look up at just the right time. One of the "seniors" leaned back in his chair, and then it happened. Out of his mouth there was a projectile launch. It was, in a word, amazing. At the start we could barely see it. But in seconds the spit arched lazily across the library. It was an object of wonder. Like Frank Ryan's passes to Gary Collins in



$$y = \frac{5 \frac{3x^2 + 5x + 2}{7w - \frac{1}{z}} - z}{4 \frac{3 + x}{7}}$$

the 1964 NFL championship, like Alan Shepard's glorious Mercury ride across the Florida skies, but with the menace of Germany's Big Bertha launching cannon shells at Paris in 1918, the honker's trajectory came on a path straight to the naive Mentor frosh. It was too late to call the Nike site in Bratenahl to intercept this incoming missile. So we did what any self respecting rising freshmen would do. We ducked under the table. Splat. The spit-spheroid landed, the shrapnel scattered harmlessly across the table. Not only were we not hit, even more important, our partially completed homework wasn't hit. Mr. Pawlowski never would have understood, or believed, that excuse. "The dog ate it" - well, maybe, but "Somebody spit on my homework from 40 feet away in the library and made the Bic Ink run." No, not credible. For our seniors, the scattering of the freshmen triggered the kind of celebratory gusto last seen in Cleveland at the end of the 1948 World Series win. They fell out of their chairs laughing at having driven us out of our chairs.

Prudence is the better part of valor. Now that the library was no longer a safe space, we exited. From then on, we would wait outside on the stairs outside the gym. And yes, that meant we never saw our "seniors" again. Occasionally I wonder whatever became of them.... Job? Vietnam? Marriage and family life? Faculty dean of a college physics department? Factotum for Jimmy Dimora?

My guess is they are professional Cherry Pit spitters, competing in contests that can be seen on ESPN2 at 2am. As for the Mentor frosh, it was the start of a four year climb up the learning curve. Over the next four years we would learn academically for sure, but maybe more important, a little about life, and a lot about the amazing things people can do.

And thanks to Mr. Pawlowski, a little algebra, too.