

U DOWN WITH OCC?

Syracuse's "other" college marks 50 years with an exhibit, book and numerous special events

It's been called "Ock on the Rock" and "Harvard on the Hill," but something it'll never be labeled is "exclusive." That's what Onondaga Community College's founders intended when they created the school on May 1, 1961; the first class met Sept. 24, 1962. Led by John Mulroy, chair of the Special Community College Study Committee, and later our first county executive, the county Board of Supervisors—which soon after morphed into the County Legislature—voted unanimously to create the two-year school that has grown in attendance, programs offered and prestige.



A photo of Mulroy clearing trees to make way for OCC's relocation to Ellis farm, atop Onondaga Hill, and owned by the county since the 1850s, is one of dozens of interesting and historic shots displayed in *50th Anniversary of Onondaga Community College*, on exhibit at the Onondaga Historical Association, 321 Montgomery St. OCC began celebrating its 50th year in 2011, and the party continues throughout the year. You'll have to act fast, however, to check out the photos, memorabilia and artifacts hanging at the OHA through Feb. 26.

"He was a worker," notes Rob O'Boyle, acquisitions and archives librarian at OCC, who served as the exhibit's curator, about the industrious Mulroy. The July 1967 photo shows Mulroy holding one end of a two-person saw with Ransom MacKenzie, chair of the Board of Trustees, and starting to clear the former Ellis farm to make way for the 230-acre campus that overlooks the entire vale of Onondaga.

It's now such a part of the fabric of Onondaga County that it's hard to imagine the region without its community college. But until 50 years ago, the area's high school graduates faced few local options for furthering their education. Le Moyne College's Jesuit leanings likely deterred some, while Syracuse University seemed downright intimidating to many.

OCC's first classes met in Midtown Plaza, the one-time factory for Smith & Corona Typewriters. Before its implosion in March 1999, Midtown Plaza was located on the quadrant of land formed by East Water Street to the north, East Washington Street to the south, Almond Street to the west, and Forman Avenue to the east. Currently, the Center of Excellence sits on that spot.

After a protracted political fight that pitted city Democrats and the *Herald Journal* against county Republicans, OCC moved up to Onondaga Hill, opening to students on Feb. 2, 1970. An interesting part of the exhibit is a political cartoon from the now-defunct *Herald*, at one time the predominant daily newspaper in Syracuse. Desperately wanting the college to stay downtown, the cartoon ridicules administration plans to build "The Isolated Ivory Tower" (accompanied by a drawing of the Parthenon in clouds on a hill).

The paper didn't get its way. Today it's hard to imagine how OCC's current enrollment of 13,000, with all the services today's students demand, could thrive at Midtown Plaza. Many of the photos in the exhibit are from the college's first decade at Midtown, and they're a hippie trip down memory lane. O'Boyle made sure to juxtapose one photo, showing suit-and-tie students, with another, obviously a small protest of some sort. "This is idyllic early 1960s," he says, "and the later 1960s.

"We have thousands of photos in our archives," O'Boyle adds. "President {Debbie} Sydow appointed a committee that has been organizing photos, digitizing photos and working on a 50th anniversary celebration."

When committee members realized the breadth of OCC's archives, they decided a book was in order. *Celebrating the Promise: The First Fifty Years of*



Not in the show, but from our photo archives: Protests, the original non-controversial college sign, the dental clinic (all facing page) and the college's well-known bridge document some history of Onondaga Community College. Get a more comprehensive look through Feb. 26 at the Onondaga Historical Association.

Onondaga Community College takes the best of the OHA exhibit and expands upon it in a 148-page retrospective. The book costs \$39.99 and is available for sale at OCC's bookstore, located in Gordon Student Center.

If you'd rather just peruse the exhibit, an optional donation will get you in the door. O'Boyle has arranged the exhibit topically, touching on campus construction; 1960s images such as students wearing beanies (how quaint); specialty departments and programs, such as public safety training; the campus' arts initiatives, including Jazz Fest; a section touching on athletics (before they were called the Lazars, OCC's teams wore the politically incorrect label of Braves); and a distilled version of OCC's history of the black community in Syracuse.

"Dennis Connors suggested we run a few photos in this exhibit," explains O'Boyle of the OHA's curator of history. "It's always on display in the campus media center."

Especially interesting is a schematic original master plan for the college from 1971, OCC in miniature, displayed under a Plexiglas cover. For the most part, the campus as it is today appears as it was envisioned, right down to the athletic fields. "It's pretty close to what's there today," O'Boyle points out. "What's missing is the pond that was drained for safety and other issues, Pogey Pond. It had been built as the

original Syracuse reservoir in the 1860s, and the Army Corps of Engineers determined it would have to be drained."

That site now holds the lower parking lots for OCC that face Onondaga Road (Route 173). Jo Anne Bakeman remembers swimming there on hot summer days. Her grandparents' dairy farm stood near Ellis farm. In a delightful closing of the circle, she's now an instructor for both the health and human services disciplines at OCC.

The newly opened SRC Arena and Events Center meant the school could hold its first convocation, ever, on Jan. 27, when Sydow spoke of Bakeman: "She mentioned that I went up Onondaga Hill to go up to the farm every day after school," Bakeman says. "It was such a tremendous vision for me when the college first moved up to the hill. I had attended the nursing program at Midtown Plaza, and then the old County Home building {colloquially called "The Poorhouse"}. We made that transition, and then I was in the first class to go across the way, meeting in the Service and Maintenance building, the first building on campus. It was pretty exciting for me that I bridged that gap. When I went to graduate school, I had a vision of teaching at OCC, and imagine my thrill when that became a reality in 1999."

In addition to the OHA exhibit, a more comprehensive look at the school's five decades can be found at sunyocc.edu. Clicking on the "50 Years" banner leads to photos, videos, remembrances and a schedule of special events, including the 49th commencement ceremony, held May 19 in SRC Arena.

Admission to the Onondaga Historical Association is free. For more information, call 428-1864.