

For Valley Academy, at one last reunion: Classmate can't forget those who never made it home



Marshall Webster (center) with Bob Haumann (left) and Ed Uhlig (right) of the Valley American Legion: Webster feared a plaque showing the names of 55 Valley Academy students or graduates who died in World War II had been lost. Instead, he found it on the wall at the legion. (Sean Kirst | skirst@syracuse.com)

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For [**Marshall Webster**](#), this was no casual search. As the days went by, as he realized the plaque might have disappeared, his quest took on a sense of last-chance urgency.

Webster learned a few months ago that the old Onondaga Valley Academy — a Syracuse high school that closed in 1965 — would hold its final all-school reunion in July.

Webster, 91, was the oldest alumnus who planned on being there. He graduated in 1946, although he'd expected to get out a couple of years earlier. Global upheaval changed all his boyhood plans: Webster was drafted in 1943, before the end of his senior year. As a teenager, [**he left for World War II from the old New York Central train station, near downtown.**](#)

When he returned, he enrolled again in high school. He was a little older than his classmates, but he saw that as good luck, not a burden.

Too many of his friends from Valley did not come back at all.

According to the 1946 yearbook, that spring's graduating class helped purchase a plaque that went up inside the building, now home to the [**Faith Heritage School**](#). The plaque held the names of 55 students or graduates from Valley killed during the war.

Fifty-five young men, and only a few classmates left in 2015 to put faces to the names.

"Since this was going to be the last reunion," Webster said, "I felt strongly (the plaque) should be there."

He asked the staff at Faith Heritage to look through the building. "They took the place apart," Webster said. There was no sign of the memorial. Webster called the [**Onondaga Historical Association**](#) and the Town of [**Onondaga Historical Society**](#), where historians offered a suggestion:

Check with the Valley American Legion.



Organizers of last weekend's final all-school Valley

Academy reunion, l to r: Carolyn Davis, class of 1960, and Pat Karins and Barb Fero, both class of 1959. (Sean Kirst | The Post-Standard) Sean Kirst | skirst@syracuse.com

Webster did. He stopped by on a day when Bob Haumann and past commander Ed Uhlig were both there. The news went beyond Webster's best hopes. Yes, they told him, they knew about the plaque. The school, decades ago, must have donated it to their organization. Within the last couple of years, the legion cleaned it up and hung it in the main hall.

The two men led Webster to the plaque. His response reminded Haumann of how Vietnam veterans [react to seeing the famous "wall" in Washington, D.C.](#)

Webster choked up. He began touching the raised letters of the names. There were friends he skated with, friends who lived down the street, friends who'd sat at nearby desks in grade school classrooms. He pointed out the name of Albert Cassidy, [an only child who died on the beaches of Normandy](#), and the Prossers - two young brothers from the same Valley family.

Seventy years gone, no children or grandchildren to follow them, and Webster could still feel them, as a living boyhood presence.

Last Friday, when 280 Valley graduates gathered at the legion on the first night of the reunion, Webster was glad they had a chance to see the plaque.

Valley closed in the same year that Corcoran opened, on Glenwood Avenue. Webster had one son, Tom, in the final Valley graduating class, and another son, John, in the first class to graduate from Corcoran.

The years rolled by, and few children today realize the old brick school they can see while they eat their ice cream at [Arctic Island](#), near Midland Avenue, used to be one of the major public high schools in Syracuse.

They don't know how Valley students used to buy french fries or doughnuts at a place called Stoudt's OVA Luncheonette, now a parking lot. Or how there used to be tennis courts behind what's now a fire station. Or about the outdoor skating rink the local firefighters would create every winter, near Seneca Turnpike, that became a place where generations of young people used to skate or play hockey.

Incidentally, we've had a lot of talk recently, in Syracuse, [about long-forgotten phone numbers](#).

If you were a teenager at Valley, trying to explain to the office why you were going to be late, the number to call was HOV-3259.

That was a long time ago, and the big reunions - for all classes - will be no more. Pat Karins, Barbara Fero and Carolyn Davis, [main organizers of last weekend's event](#), said the Valley all-class reunions were held for more than a century.

Yet with this year marking the 50th anniversary of Valley's final graduating class, it seemed to be the right moment for an all-school finale, although individual classes certainly will still hold their own reunions.

That "this-is-it" atmosphere resulted in a big and emotional crowd. "A lot of these people I'll never see again," said Joe DeGroote, class of 1957, who traveled here from Florida. He vividly remembered playing football under the lights at the old Roosevelt field on Brighton Avenue, back when that stadium was a regional showcase for the high school game.

Saturday morning, Faith Heritage opened the doors to its building, allowing Valley graduates to wander the halls. There were plenty of stories about Enrico's, a favorite scholastic hangout for pizza. Many graduates shared memories of Jerry Berrigan, [the famed activist who died this week at](#)

95; at Valley, they saw him primarily as a gifted English teacher who'd flash classroom lights and throw erasers off the board to simulate Shakespearean thunderstorms.

Karins, class of 1959, offered a few tales of E. Dorothy Swindells, a memorable chemistry teacher who smoked cigars, while just about everyone recalled Stewart Powlesland, better known as "Prof," a gentle and beloved Valley principal.

One graduate, who even now requests anonymity, said teenage members of a distinguished school organization once delighted "Prof" by presenting him with a towering school Christmas tree.

"What 'Prof' didn't know," the graduate said, "is that the police were looking for the sons of ... who cut down a tree in [St. Agnes Cemetery](#)."

Saturday, before a reunion dinner at the Inn of the Seasons, [Vahan Khanzadian](#), Class of '57, led the crowd in singing Valley's alma mater. Karins asked him because she could remember the day she heard his voice, powerful and beautiful, in the hallway at Valley; she quietly went into the auditorium and sat in the last row, just to watch him rehearse.

Khanzadian became a celebrated tenor with the Metropolitan Opera, but he was more interested Saturday in all the time he spent playing baseball with Bobby Milligan, a close friend since kindergarten.



Close friends in childhood, close friends still:

Bobby Milligan, Vahan Khanzadian at final all-classes Valley Academy reunion. Sean Kirst | skirst@syracuse.com

Milligan, who worked as a Medicare audit supervisor, recalled how Khanzadian's arm got pinned and damaged, during childhood, by a wringer washer. He regained his strength by throwing thousands of crab apples in the yard, a boyhood ritual that Milligan said helped turn his friend into a skilled high school pitcher.

As for Khanzadian, he thinks one of the reasons he stayed at Valley — rather than choosing the old [Central High](#) — was because Milligan also went there, after the boys attended different middle schools.

"A tree has many branches," Khanzadian said. "In life, you pick one particular artery and that leads to other arteries, to other branches that open up. My life might have been completely different if I had gone to Central."

Similar appreciation was everywhere, whether it came from Andy Leighton (who wore a letter sweater he earned for playing tennis) or Ray Chaffee (an 88-year-old who saw the gathering as "the end of an era," but who reflected wistfully on the scarcity of graduates his age) or David Allen (whose favorite memories involved pickup football with his buddies, at a park near Newell Street).

Marshall Webster, for his part, spent a lot of time thinking about the 55 guys from the 1940s who never made it to a reunion, the ones honored on the plaque at the legion hall.

"If I let it, all this could bring me to tears," said Webster, simply pleased — amid this final salute for old Valley — that so many from the school got one last chance to read those names.

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