

Bloomsburg Middle School

The Bloomsburg Middle School as told to Patchwork by Mr. Arthur Steiner.
Interviewed by Celina Boyer & Jessica Watkins in April 2003

The Bloomsburg Middle School is significant because it provides a place for young teenagers to learn. It's been around for almost twenty years and the construction of the middle school was busy and exciting.

Mr. Arthur Steiner is a current teacher at the Bloomsburg Middle School. He was involved in the TV distribution and sound system installment in the gym and auditorium when the new middle school was built.

PATCHWORK: When did the construction of the new middle school start and end?

STEINER: The building itself was 1988, but planning everything went back to 1985 or 1986. Construction occurred during 1986 and 1987. The grand opening was in the fall of 1988.

PATCHWORK: What was all involved in the planning of the middle school?

STEINER: The planning of the middle school, as I remember it, began as a proposal to the Board of Directors. Once the proposal was put before the Board, the community itself was polled as to whether a new middle school was necessary. One of the problems with the location of the old middle school was that it was in the center of town, which meant there were limited activity areas, athletic areas, and parking space. Because the building was historically a town landmark, however, still in good condition, the community was a little reluctant to accept the idea of a new middle school. So the idea had to be sold first to the community at large with the board and the community finally agreed to construct a new middle school.

After that we were told that the teacher committees would consist of the science, language arts, social studies, and expressive arts departments. We were all put together in teams to help plan a building layout that would be the most ideal and educational facility that could be built. From that point on, the planning went into developmental stages, which was an interesting process because the teachers had a lot of input. I remember one week the teachers suggested a swimming pool. We also recommended an elevator be included in the plans. I think we are the only building in the school district with an active elevator; all the others have a stair system. At the time the new middle school was being considered, the state was just beginning to recognize the needs of temporarily or permanently disabled students to have access to upper

levels of buildings. In the old middle school, for example, some students had to have all of their classes on the first floor because there was no access for them to the upper level. That problem had to be addressed under the Disabilities Act before districts took action to correct the problem. After several meetings, we presented our proposal to the principal, who at the time was Don Gross, and he presented it to the Board of Directors for their approval, or at least their consideration. The final proposal was then put before an architectural firm that designed the building.

Next, the architect and his representative arrived to show us why our ideas would or would not work. We then went through three or four rough sketches and blueprints of what the building should be like. The ideas that could work were incorporated into the building plan.

PATCHWORK: How was the transition from the old middle school to the new middle school? How did you feel about teaching in the new middle school when it was still under construction? What was that like?

STEINER: We had a renovation in the 1970's of the middle school and that's what the elementary school is going through right now. Basically you have to learn to live with noise, dust, dirt, and debris, and the fact that your classroom may not be available when you want it because of the simple fact that things change on a construction timetable. I know my room was moved about three or four times. Making sure that the students knew where we were going to be the next day or the next week was a problem. A lot of times we lost electricity. There were times when the furnace didn't work, you know, things that.

When we got here, during the construction of the new middle school, the building was 90 percent finished. There were still construction people in the building at the time, but we didn't have disruption of classes to the degree we had when the old middle school was being remodeled. For about the first half of the year we lived with construction and the noise of cement trucks and workers finishing up what they had to do. I would say the construction noise was one of the biggest things we had to adjust to, and the fact that our room may or may not be available. Our assigned spaces had to be changed or moved around at the time because we were sharing things.

PATCHWORK: What specific part did you take on building the middle school?

STEINER: I was asked about the AV items. Teachers asked for a closed circuit TV system, which we got. I assisted with technical information about the sound system in the cafeteria, gymnasium, and pool area. In particular, we investigated to find out what kind of loud speakers could be used in the pool area. They had to have a special polyethylene base because regular cone speakers with paper or fiber bases wouldn't last in the humidity there. I would say the sound systems in those areas plus the TV systems were my part of the project.

PATCHWORK: What was the estimated cost of redoing the new middle school?

STEINER: I'm not sure that I remember; it was a couple of million, I think. I know the Board had to float a bond to pay for it.

PATCHWORK: Has the middle school gone through any more changes since it's been built?

STEINER: The layout of the middle school is basically the same, but some of the rooms have been changed. Work areas were modified into guidance counselors' rooms. Some of the other rooms have been converted into other areas, such as an exit way that is now a storage closet. The only other thing I can think of is the increased security equipment and surveillance cameras. Ever since the Columbine incident, school security has become a priority, so I would say the building is more secure than it has been. There are still some items that could be improved upon, which, I think, over time will occur. Some changes might be a card pass system that will record when you enter the building with your ID card and will also note when you leave the building. The other thing that's going to happen, I think, will be the transmission of the TV signal. We're going into high definition, and that will change the clarity and quality of the TV distribution system here. In the future, everybody will be on high definition TV and the plasma screens. There will be 42-inch screens, and the enlarged presentations will make education a little bit more exciting.

PATCHWORK: Are any of the teachers who taught when the new middle school opened still working here now?

STEINER: Besides me? Let's see. We have Mr. Kauffman, Miss. McGovern, Mrs. Hersh, Mr. Mordon, Mrs. Brando, Mr. Jeff Prosseda, Miss. Crane, Mr. Taylor, Mr. Matukaitis, Mr. Helfrich, Mr. Horn, and Mrs. Edwards. We're getting to be the old timers! I'd say, though, that we're going to see fewer and fewer of us with retirements. Some recent retirees are Mr. Beishline, Mr. Ryan, Mr. Schoffstall, Mr. Jim Prosseda, Mrs. Roadarmel, and, of course, there's Mr. Lynn, who is deceased.

PATCHWORK: What job did they take when the middle school was being constructed? Did they have a job?

STEINER: The jobs? Basically everyone was given some kind of opportunity to incorporate his or her ideas. I know Mr. Ryan incorporated the art room in the stage area he wrote and directed the plays. And all the teachers helped with the move. The administration at the time wasn't sure in which building we would start school or even whether school would begin on time. The decision was made two or three weeks before school started that we would begin on time in the old building. I remember that at the time we had to pack up everything in the early weeks because they were saying we would move down after Fair Week, then it was changed to sometime before

Christmas break. Teachers didn't know whether they would be walking around in construction or whether the builders, they were the painters and ceiling tilers, as I remember, would be allowed to finish and then we would move into a completed building. The moving was probably the most difficult responsibility, how to get everything from the old to the new building. Some things had to be moved by maintenance people and other things were moved by teachers themselves. We loaded up our cars or trucks or whatever we had and brought everything we could down here so we'd be ready for opening day. Sorting and packing things was probably our biggest, I wouldn't say hassle, but time-consuming operation. We had to decide what to bring and what to toss.

PATCHWORK: What was one of the big differences between the old middle school and the new middle school?

STEINER: Well, I think we have a safety factor here we didn't have before. We had incidents at the old school where one or two students actually were hit by cars either going to or coming from school, especially out-of-towners, were unaware that we had a school in the middle of town. The other factor was the athletic area. There was none! It was just a macadam area. A new school had to be built because the old middle school did not have the room for the kind of expansion we needed to do then. The old school was designed for a different time period and philosophy. It was first a high school, then a junior high school, and finally a middle school. It didn't fit the middle school concept very well, but still have fond memories of my time there.

PATCHWORK: Are there any limits to this school now that it's built that you didn't have at the old middle school?

STEINER: This school was designed for a smaller student population. I think we're just about at the point that we're going to have to increase the facility, maybe add some instructional space. I have noticed that over the last three to five years that the number of students per grade level has increased maybe twenty or thirty students beyond what the building was designed to accommodate. We need another classroom or two just to alleviate some size problems. When you're all cramped in and the walls are closing in on you, it's kind of tough to concentrate. And we have some rooms in the building without windows, and I think that's a big limitation. The ability to look out occasionally and see what the weather is doing is something the building lacks. The other drawback to the building is that it's not air-conditioned except in its center core area. When the building was being planned, we recommended that all instructional areas be air-conditioned. In fall and spring here, there are days when you just wilt because the air doesn't move very well, especially in the rooms without windows. Air-conditioning would help with the other problem, and that is the odor from the sewer plant. I'm sure you get that in the high school, so you know what I'm talking about. The heat and bad air are the occasional drawbacks here; it just depends on which way the wind is blowing, I guess.

PATCHWORK: Was it very difficult moving everything from the old middle school to the new middle school?

STEINER: The element of time that I mentioned before caused a lot of pressure. The other thing was there weren't many boxes around, so we would teach, and then we would make a box run. Teachers would actually run to the liquor store downtown on the corner. They were the one place that supplied a lot of the boxes. I can remember a lot of the teachers' rooms looking like a whiskey distributor warehouse because the boxes advertised many brands of alcohol. But it was kind of a necessity; we had to find a way to pack cheaply. Sometimes we would ask people that had moved things to the new middle school ahead of us in other kinds of boxes to please not throw their boxes away. We didn't like our rooms looking like a whiskey warehouse; it wasn't something that we wanted to be connected with education. I can't say that all the boxes had some kind of logo on them.

PATCHWORK: About how many people could you estimate took part in constructing and planning the new middle school?

STEINER: There was a committee created by the board, or a building committee, and then the community itself had come input. Teachers could make recommendations through their department chairs. I would say a minimum of fifty people had an active part. We were working within a group that met with the architect. Probably of the fifty, thirty were very active; the rest were involved off and on.

PATCHWORK: Did you look at helping with the new middle school as being a job or an opportunity?

STEINER: It was an opportunity, the second time I've been involved with something like this. It was rewarding to help make the school the way you wanted it to be and then see changes as they occurred. For example, as I said, I helped set up the whole TV distribution system. Another thing I helped with was suggesting that the audiovisual room be located centrally in the school so that we had a place for AV equipment don't have to haul it from one side of the building to the other. I was part of the group that suggested we put in an elevator. That helps, too, with moving equipment, as well as for its primary use by students and teachers. I would say this building has a lot of quality features in its design. The only thing I regret, as I mentioned, is the lack of air-conditioning, which if it had been added, would help improve education in the fall and spring, and it would even help with activities over the summer, including those of community groups that use the building in the summer. No one can stay here past 11:00 A.M. as it is now. It would be a big plus if the building were converted to air-conditioning. That and a new roof. My room was Niagara Falls here a couple of times. I guess when you build a flat roof you're going to have those problems. It's

going to cost a lot of money to add a pitch to the roof and a better run-off system. When you don't plan for the building to last a hundred years, as the designers of the old middle school did, you'll have to put money into constant repairs.

PATCHWORK: Do you have anything else to add to anything, maybe there's something real important you think we should know?

STEINER: If you look at the building and where the grounds are, you can tell that it was originally a parking lot. I watched the building being built; it is actually on columns underneath here so that the building is above the hundred-year flood plain. When you walk up the steps here, you see you have to come up about nineteen and a half feet. Nineteen feet was the hundred-year flood level; so to get state and federal money to support the construction, the building had to be built above the flood plain. But there was an oversight; they didn't fill in the drains that were in the former parking lot. They are still in the basement. So in a storm, if the water backs up in the storm sewer, it comes into the basement of this building. That brings with it whatever is in the ground water. Anyway, when it's wet, the basement has a musty odor. When the middle school was being built, no one noticed this oversight until the first hard rain.