NEWS

YOUNG AND OLD JOIN AS SCHOOL CELEBRATES PAST

By CHICAGO TRIBUNE

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Highwood's Oak Terrace School has been an institutional heirloom in Alex Guajardo's family for years.

Just as parents bestow treasured jewelry, clothes and furniture on their children, Alex, 7, and his siblings "inherited" their mother's elementary school classrooms, library, gym and 2nd-grade teacher, Margaret Zaller.

Generations passing through the school since it opened in 1916 helped forge lasting bonds.

Zaller first saw Alex at Highland Park Hospital when he was a day old.

“Visiting hours were over, and the nurse asked me if I was family. I explained the situation to her and she said, `You’re family,’ and let me in to see Alex,” said Zaller, who will retire this summer after 34 years.

But Zaller will not be the only one walking out Oak Terrace’s doors for the last time in June.

Alex, his classmates, staff, parents and alumni also will be saying goodbye to the crowded red-brick school building.

The school will be torn down in June and a larger facility built in its place. North Shore School District 112 officials have been working to build a new school for years.

Many, including Highwood Mayor John Sirotti, who attended the school are expected to relive their glory days at the school at a three-hour celebration Sunday at Oak Terrace, 240 Prairie Ave., with a documentary, presentations by pupils and a groundbreaking ceremony for the new $13 million building.

Teta Minuzzo, an Oak Terrace teacher from 1960 to 1995, is arranging a display of old class photos for the occasion.

While collecting the many black-and-white photos in the school attic, Minuzzo, 61, also stumbled upon three pairs of wooden Dutch clogs that were worn by pupils in the 1940s and 1950s for Friendship Days, designed to expose children to the world’s different cultures.

Standing next to the footwear and piles of old snapshots, Minuzzo said the impending demolition is sad but is necessary to make space for a school that can accommodate the growing student population and burgeoning technology.

Many of the school’s cherished possessions, including the stump of a 207-year-old oak tree from the 3 1/2-acre campus, a large oil painting created in memory of a teacher who died in 1946 and an 1868 dictionary given as a gift,

During the 2000-01 school year, the pupils, mostly from Highwood, Highland Park and Ft. Sheridan, will be bused to classes in the soon-to-be-vacated Lake Forest Intermediate School, which is owned by Lake Forest High School.

Minuzzo said Sunday's commemoration will be filled with joy but admitted she could get choked up when the building is torn apart. "My ties are not with the bricks and mortar," Minuzzo said. "It's with the children and feelings inside the building, and you can't take those away.

"But if there are any tears, they're not going to come until they bring in that bulldozer."

Antonio Galvan, 27, a Highland Park High School counselor and former pupil of Minuzzo's, said it was weird knowing the school he and his siblings attended after their family emigrated from Mexico in 1978 would be gone.

"It's part of your past that's no longer there, and that's hard to accept," he said.

Sarah Duffy, 19, a University of Illinois at Chicago student and Oak Terrace alumna, has bittersweet feelings about the demolition of Oak Terrace.

"I won't be able to show my grandchildren where I went to school," she said. "But the new school might educate the children in a more 21st Century way."

Erecting an 80,000-square-foot building on the existing property was never the district's first choice.

Although Highwood residents approved a $40 million referendum proposal for a new school in 1997, obtaining land proved to be quite challenging.

Plans to purchase property west of Exmoor Country Club were scrapped after neighbors objected, and school officials pulled the plug on the option of securing land from Ft. Sheridan last year after negotiations dragged on for several months.

Razing the current building became the best solution, said Principal Ray Rodriguez.

The school has become so cramped for the 435 pupils that there are two mobile classrooms, lunch is served in three shifts and three reading

Fourth grader Tiziana Stuparitz is delighted that her younger peers will get a new school.

“I’m kind of happy because our school is small and jampacked,” said Tiziana, 9. She will be in junior high by the time the new school is built.

Several of Zaller’s pupils forfeited recess recently to work on a collage of pictures of their older relatives. Melissa Harding, 7, pointed to a dark-haired girl in an old class photo.

“That’s my grandmother,” she said, adding that her mother also had Zaller as a teacher and went to the “best school in the whole world.”