

Dr. G.W. Williams? history is a family affair for local author



By Brock Weir

When it comes to Dr. G.W. Williams High School, Mary Beth Hess has got all the angles covered.

Ms. Hess grew up in Aurora, attended school first at George Street Public School, followed by Aurora Heights, Aurora Senior Public School, and spent the duration of her entire high school career at Williams.

After her success there, she went onto the University of Western Ontario, moved out to California with her husband almost immediately after her marriage and, two sons later, returned to her home town where the next generation made their family proud in the Williams corridors.

Ms. Hess' experiences both as a student and parent has put her in good stead to chart the school's last quarter century as the Williams community prepares to mark their 125th anniversary this May.

The result is a refreshed keepsake book documenting the long history of the secondary school, which started off life 125 years ago as Aurora's first high school. A few name and location changes here and there, the landmark anniversary of the landmark institution will be brought to life through alumni activities at a special reunion on Friday, May 5 and Saturday, May 6, culminating with

blowout dance at the Aurora Community Centre.

For Ms. Hess, though, updating the book is picking up where her brother, John McIntyre, left off. Working together they laid the groundwork for the update and then it was up to her to make the follow-through.

"I enjoy the history," says Ms. Hess. "It's nice to have something for everyone to take home, to remember Williams and what their school may have been like, remember the building, stories in the book they may have forgotten about and all the teachers and principal are listed right from 1888, so I just thought it would be good to keep some things alive."

The first stumbling block in getting the new edition of the book rolling off the press was reproducing John's original book. The original printer plates from 1988 were no longer usable, so everything needed to be scanned and digitized. Luckily for her, her husband works converting various media to digital, so the equipment to do so was already close at hand.

"The first 62 pages of John's original book were fully scanned, so once I set that up, I focused on my 25 years," she says. "Lynn Weller, the administrative assistant at the school was very good in giving me everything she could get her hand on in helping me do the research, so I went through the 25 years of yearbooks, newspaper clippings, and all those sorts of things and just pulled everything together."

"The people [are the most important things]. The building is wonderful, the people always change, but when I went through the 25 years of yearbooks, everything felt so warm and welcoming. There was a club for everybody, everybody was included, whether it is the staff, the students, or the custodians, it just seems like one big happy family."

After 21 years in California, her family move back to Aurora and that sense of family with the school went that one extra level.

"We came back to Aurora in 2004 and my sons went to Williams," she says. "My older son is in his first year at Western, so it is a small world. How things come together is just strange sometimes. Coming back [as a parent] it is bigger but everything looks the same. I still found it very welcoming when I walked in but I had not been back at all since I graduated in 1975."

In the lead-up to this spring's reunion, Ms. Hess is putting the finishing touches on the update, including a couple of further proofreads under her belt and designing a cover, and then getting the copies moving. All proceeds from the book sale and reunion events will be re-invested back into Williams.

"I hope people keep the book for a long time and I hope it will help them connect with people and create some happy memories," she says. "The reunion is going to be a lot of fun and I think people are really looking forward to meeting people and talking to them face to face rather than just on Facebook and email. I think they will come away very happy."

For more information on the Reunion, how to register for the events, and reserve your copy of the book, visit www.reunion125.ca, or email reunion125@bell.net.