

Four generations of G.W. Williams students toast school



By Brock Weir

Over 75 years of Dr. G.W. Williams Secondary School's 125 years were exemplified in the seats that filled their auditorium Saturday afternoon as Reunion 125 kicked off.

Students, teachers, and support staff from the present day, going back as far as one student who first crossed Aurora High School's threshold when it was on Wells Street back in 1939, came to pay tribute to their school and re-connect with old friends, and maybe even a foe or two.

Jean Archibald Babcock was singled out as the returning student with the most storied history in attendance. Joining the school in 1939 and graduating in the class of 1945, well before the school became known as Aurora District High School, and then Williams after it moved to Dunning Avenue, she said she wouldn't have missed the reunion for anything.

"There is so much going on now and I think it's wonderful what they have for schools today," she said in awe at some of the artwork produced by the current crop of Williams students.

She was joined at the reunion by her great-nephew, John Gibson, whose mother was the first "head girl" at the school when it set up shop on Dunning, and the family history doesn't end there.

"My mother was a head girl, my brother was president of student Council when I was here, so there are a lot of personal memories," he said, noting "fun" was the first word that comes to mind whenever he thinks of Williams. "I talk to so many different people from other high schools and they talk about the times we had in high school, and they can't believe the fun we had here at Williams."

This sense of fun was shared by many returning alumni who made the journey for the reunion from across Canada from Alberta to Nova Scotia down through the United States from Florida, and even some flying in from England and Switzerland. In a headcount lead by Reunion 125 Committee Chair Bob McRoberts, although graduates from the 1940s through to the 2010s were there, the contingent from the 1970s led the pack both in population and in noise!

Among this contingent was Newmarket-Aurora MP Lois Brown, who brought a special message from Prime Minister Stephen Harper marking the occasion.

"I would like to say thank you to all the teachers, past and present, for all they have done to invest in the students who have walked through these hallways; for the knowledge and the concern and the inspiration they have been; because students at Dr. G.W. Williams are helping to change the world."

Joining Ms. Brown among the dignitaries were MPP Frank Klees, whose son is a Williams grad, Mayor Geoffrey Dawe, and seven returning principals all eager to share the occasion. Before the principals spoke, however, one prominent student, Keith Kincaid of the class of 1954, who went onto a long career with the Canadian Press, shared his memories.

‘The politicians on this stage will be very, very jealous,’ he said. ‘I’m sure you worked hard to get elected and you worked very hard to carry out your campaign promises, but I can tell you in 1952 I was almost in this exact same spot campaigning for Student Council. I made only one promise: if I was elected, I would arrange for everyone to get a day off school. That was good enough because I was elected on a Friday and the following Monday was Thanksgiving Day!’

He also shared memories of a very different world, when Aurora was much smaller, teachers and faculty were students' neighbours and family friends, when students' latest test scores were taped up in the window of the old Aurora Banner office at Yonge and Wellington, and, when Williams had strong ties to cadet corps, there was a long-since-gone shooting range in the Dunning Avenue basement.

The principals, introduced by Mr. McRoberts, spoke of their time at the school but also paid tribute to those who made the weekend festivities possible.

‘Every school has its own climate and it is created by the actions and ideas of the students, principals, board members and outside people,’ said former principal Harry Gerber. ‘Each of their actions create these ripples which flow and mesh with each other and there are 125 years of ripples in this school. One primary fact is these ripples do not disappear.’

‘I hope mine helped to create a positive environment that my grandsons who attend here, convinced me they undergo every day in their school careers.’