

# My Six-Year High School Career



WSBA President  
Steven G. Toole

## How Walnut Hills High Prepared Me for College and Life

I grew up in Cincinnati. Other than the hot humid summers, it was a great place to live. My fondest memories of my childhood were *the six years I spent in high school*. I attended Walnut Hills High School (WHHS) from 1960 to 1966 and was there from grade seven through twelve...and that's the way it was supposed to be. WHHS was and is a very unique and interesting school. It is a public school located in the center of Cincinnati. The school is classic Jeffersonian architecture and the setting from the front or west side of the school is idyllic, with a gorgeous expansive park-like view of tree-lined Victory Parkway far down below. On the other hand, if you walked outside the back or east side of the school, you were in a very depressed, low economic inner-city neighborhood.

WHHS was a college preparatory school. Every sixth grader in the entire city took an IQ test and if you got a high enough score, your parents were given an option of letting you attend your local district junior high school and high school or attending Walnut Hills for a six-year commitment, knowing that the courses would be more difficult and that it was assumed that everyone at the school was going to attend college upon graduation from high school. In fact, in our graduating class of approximately 270 people, my recollection is that about 98 percent attended college. As a result of this city-wide pool of potential students, we weren't just a school of egg heads, but we had an incredibly diverse student body. The students

attending WHHS crossed all geographic, economic, religious, and ethnic lines. The poor and the rich, black and white, the Protestants, Catholics and Jews, the students from the inner city and those from the suburbs all took three years of Latin, had lockers next to each other, ate lunch together, showered together after gym class, and socialized with each other on the weekends. The school had then, and continues to have today, a national reputation for excellence in academics.



There was no need for wealthy families to send their children to expensive private schools to assure top-notch high school education. Cincinnati had Walnut Hills High School.

During the 1960s, we all used to say that WHHS was one-third Protestant/Catholic, one-third black, and one-third Jewish. We all got along. We all respected each other. Cincinnati high schools at that time had an interesting social system. On Friday nights following either football games in the fall or basketball

games in the winter, different high schools would alternate having what we called open houses. I don't believe there was any formality to the rotation system. I think we just didn't want to have open houses going on at all the schools on the same nights. I would like to think that one of the unique aspects of WHHS was that our diversity brought the youth of the city together. If there was an open house in the outlying community of North College Hill, we had WHHS students who lived

in that community and were welcome to attend that open house, bringing his or her classmates from WHHS. If the open house was at Withrow, again we had WHHS students who lived in that district and we were all welcome at that open house. The same with open houses at Walnut Hills or Western Hills, Woodward,

Aiken, Taft, etc.

The result was we all got to know people from all over Cincinnati and for the most part we got along. We learned from each other. Coming from a middle-class white family living in an old, well-to-do neighborhood, my early childhood was somewhat sheltered. Exposure to such diversity in high school was enlightening. It sold me on the value of public education and it caused me to overcome the fears and prejudices that my parents and the parents of my white

Jewish friends had experienced growing up and in their adulthood. We didn't think of people as being black or white, rich or poor, privileged or not. We were all friends and shared common dreams and goals. We supported each other and cheered each other on. Although my family and I moved from Cincinnati upon my graduation from high school and I get back there only once every four or five years for a few days, I am still close to my friends from high school and I always return to visit WHHS when I am in Cincinnati. The school still follows the same format, still experiences an excellent national academic reputation,

still has a very diverse student body, and is still going strong.

I am sharing this story with you partly due to pride. I am proud of Walnut Hills and of the city of Cincinnati for creating a public school of this type. I am proud to be a graduate of WHHS and I am proud to see all the accomplishments that my fellow graduates have achieved. The number of our graduates who have gone on to become educators, lawyers, doctors, scientists, political leaders, etc. is both remarkable and gratifying.

Yet this is not the only reason I am sharing with you my high school experience. The other reason is what it has

taught me about diversity and the value of providing equal opportunities to all people, regardless of their economic status, religion, or color of their skin. The WSBA has made great strides in diversity over the last few years. We now have diversity policies in place related to appointing members and chairs to WSBA committees, boards, and councils. This year, out of 14 governors, six are women and nine in total are from a diverse background. If you attend a Board of Governors' meeting, you will observe generally anywhere from 25 to 50 liaisons and guests in attendance, paying keen attention to the issues facing the BOG and providing valuable input both individually and on behalf of the committees; sections; minority, local, county, and specialty bar associations; the various judicial associations; and the access to justice community they represent. Of these liaisons and guests, a significant percentage represent our diverse community. The leadership of our association, and our association as a whole, would be much poorer but for the contributions of these stakeholders.

I cannot take credit for the strides our association has made over the last several years regarding diversity. Much of that credit goes to past and present leadership on the Board of Governors, including past presidents Ron Ward, Dick Eymann, Dave Savage, and Salvador Mungia and governors such as Eric de los Santos, Brenda Williams, Anthony Gipe, Lori Haskell, Cathy Moore, and Carla Lee, to name just a few. They have been instrumental in acknowledging and engaging our diverse communities in WSBA governance. They have also begun educating the WSBA membership and leadership as to what they didn't previously know or understand about diversity.

As I was fortunate to learn over 40 years ago in high school, our association, the legal community, our neighborhoods, our cities, and our state are much better off when we embrace our diverse communities, empower them, value their contributions, and encourage their involvement in leadership. It is not something that is accomplished in just a few years. It is a never-ending journey that we have essentially just begun. ☺

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