



A class of second-grade Dommerich students in 1965

[FIRST PERSON]

My Old School

The author has fond memories of attending Maitland's Dommerich Elementary. Turns out a lot of other former students do, too. And they're going back to say goodbye to the school before it's torn down. **By Gary McKechnie**



Gary McKechnie's fifth-grade class photo

MOST PEOPLE, I GUESS, HAVE STRONGER memories of their high school years than they do of elementary school. But not me. Driving home from my 20th high school reunion some years ago, I was impressed with how many of my former classmates had grown up to be completely and magnificently forgettable.

But if most of those faces and names didn't ring any bells, I instantly recognized the people at the reunion who had also attended Maitland's Dommerich Elementary School with me. At the reunion, there were about 30 of us who had attended Dommerich between 1968 and 1974. In suits and evening gowns were men and women whom I had only known as boys and girls, but I quickly realized that my bonds with them were far stronger than the loose threads that tied me to many of my high school classmates.

Maybe that says something about how special Dommerich was in those days.

After the event, I found my thoughts drifting back to Dommerich. It was a nice trip; one of the most pleasing vacations I had taken in years. I remembered Tracy Evans and his kickball prowess, and when Julie Cook swallowed a fly; the bicycle Dennis Cagna won on *Bozo*, and Lorelee Rider's smile. There were Keith Blackway, Wendy Haluza and Jeff Stublely. I could go down each row of desks, from each grade, and point out where Stevie Adelson sat or where Herbie Long hid the candy he'd sell at recess. Within a few days I had written down names and my memories of nearly 100 kids I hadn't thought of in more than 25 years. The list kept growing, and months later it peaked at 164.

The clarity of these memories could only be assigned to the fortunes of youth.

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If you have a credit score, driver's license or day planner, then you understand the halcyon years of elementary school: that flicker of time when days were safe, simple and comforting. While I attended Dommerich, I was too young to understand Vietnam, Watergate and assassinations.

Now I'm 46 and I understand these things.

And recently I learned that Dommerich Elementary School, the time capsule of my childhood, would be torn down next fall to make way for a bigger, better and safer Dommerich to be built in its place. I now understand why this kind of thing happens, too.

When my older brother, Kevin (Class of '69), learned that Dommerich would be bulldozed, he called me with the idea to hold a reunion at the school. Within a week, three of my classmates, Dean Harisis, Sue Walker and Marianne Wittels, had created a Web site (dommerichreunion.org) and contacted the PTA to pitch it on the plan to host a reunion of Dommerich alumni, on May 2, 2009, at the school.

When you're my age, few things have the power to strike you as magical. This reunion plan was magical. As word of it and the



Dommerich will be completely rebuilt next year

Prisoners of Willis. To carry the gag further, at recess I and other junior juvenile delinquents played "prison break" by tunneling under a fence and crawling through a drainage pipe that ran under Thistle Lane and into the woods across the street. We always returned in time for class. I still crack up thinking of my pal David Schwartz's smirk as he hides a penny in his uneaten mashed potatoes, knowing what follows will be the sharp sound of grinding metal when the lunch lady dumps his leftovers into the garbage disposal.

Dommerich, which was built in 1965, will be replaced as part of a \$44.7 million school rebuilding project that includes neighboring Maitland Middle School. When the new Dommerich is completed later in 2009, it will be a "functional and efficient educational facility" with "an enhanced security

design limiting access only through the school's administration center," according to an Orange County Public Schools press release. That's all well and good, and perhaps the new building will one day be full of memories for the kids who will attend it. But for me and my old classmates, the new school could no more replace the Dommerich of our memories than the new Yankee Stadium could

"I never missed school because I always looked forward to how much trouble I could stir up. Great memories that will last forever. I'm still local, so I still go by every now and then just for the memories. Look forward to seeing some old faces."

—Comment posted by Keith Blackway, Class of '74, on dommerichreunion.org

Web site spread, teachers from my years there signed up to ask if they, too, could attend. Each day on the Web site new stories and new faces appeared. Young faces—kids who graduated as recently as 2005—began to show up on the site. It hadn't occurred to us when we organized the reunion that children who were still in school would want to attend.

Separated by age, we were united by Dommerich.

Tim McGuire (Class of '69) remembered arriving during the school's first year and voting on the school mascot (an Indian chief) and school colors (dark blue and white). He also recalled the lunch ladies serving what they called "Mexican top hats," which were just curled-up fried bologna with a slab of dry mashed potatoes in the center. He hasn't eaten bologna since.

Ann McNamara (Class of '87) remembers "Jimmy Xander putting a skink in his shirt during recess."

Forty years after she graduated—Diana Wood (Class of '68) remembers the epicurean pleasures of "orange Popsicles on Fridays and extra rolls when we were in 6th grade!"

Others recalled the sense of safety they felt as they walked home from school, knowing neighbors 10 blocks away. People reminisced about the parties at Skate City, violin classes and how they managed to carry books without backpacks.

A flood of memories rushed over me as well. Dommerich's Class of '74 studied under the watch of Principal Willis, whose last initial provided us with the clever inside joke that we were all "POW's"—

replace the House That Ruth Built.

Come to think of it, our Dommerich had no need for "an enhanced security design." It was a place where kids didn't have to worry about the real world. For us, the real world was a place where you could be a musician with a wood block or a triangle, and where a cootie shot was effective until you met a girl whose cooties you craved.

I know Dommerich is nothing more than an aging brick building held together by mortar, spitballs and dried gum. Its demise is understandable, but the old school isn't going to fall without a proper send-off.

In May, hundreds of former Dommerich students will return to walk the school's halls. Many will get a good laugh out of trying to squeeze into classroom desks, and some of us will step into the cafeteria and remember Friday's orange Popsicles and extra rolls. Meanwhile, I'll keep an eye on David Schwartz, the lunchroom prankster. He plans to drive down from Gainesville for the event.

Schwartz was always up to something in grade school, but he didn't always get away with it. One of his fondest memories of Dommerich involves a crayon-throwing fight and a paddle.

"No parental consent or lawsuits over this stuff in the good old days," he wrote on the reunion Web site. "Happy times."

Schwartz grew up to be a lawyer. ☐

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