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### Ken Dixon: 40 years on, trepidation turns to relief

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The Class of 1972 certainly isn't unscathed. You could see it up there on the projector screen at the reunion last weekend.

There's the beautiful cheerleader, frozen in time in our yearbook, smiling sweetly, a couple years before she would die of leukemia.

Thirty seconds later, the next frame is the photo of the shaggy haired hockey-playing motorcyclist, whose off-road exploits gave him the senior-year glory of a big-old plaster cast on his broken ankle.

A couple photos away is the brilliant girl, friendly but self-conscious, from the old neighborhood, a victim of bad acne who killed herself before most of us got out of college.

Then there are the football players, a pair of all-state linemen who died recently. One was the fastest player on our team, which was the last state-championship squad the school has fielded in all these subsequent decades, as the deep grass of the famous Depression-era stadium, filled to overflowing for our games, has yielded to artificial, green-colored petrochemical turf, lower expectations, indifferent teams and empty seats.

The social anxiety and trepidations of anticipating reunions are great.

I mean, who had fun in high school, especially during the height of the Vietnam War? Connecticut teenagers were getting killed in jungles on the other side of the globe, but couldn't buy a six-pack of beer back home? That made the kind of sense indicative of the era.

So yeah, we drove over the line to New York, filling bars whose proprietors never looked askance at our doctored paper drivers' licenses, when they examined them at all.

The evening news was bringing grisly footage from the jungles, where, for all we knew, we'd be heading shortly after graduation, courtesy of the draft.

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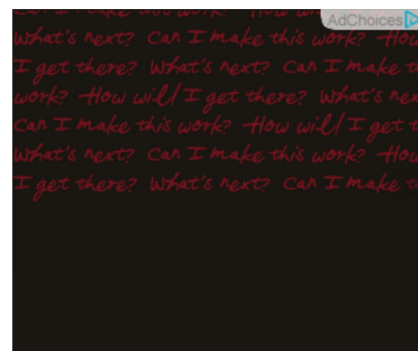
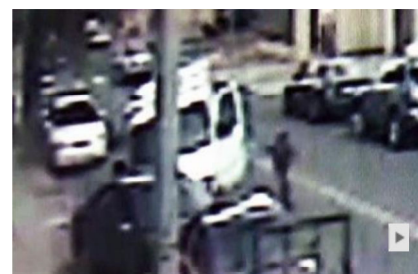


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There was a war going on inside us, too, against the nearest authority there was: the school administration.

Imagine a designated smoking area on the school campus. We had it. Think of an announcement on the school intercom that the [Future Teachers](#) of America club was gathering for its yearbook photo and 100 kids who never even heard of the club walking out of class for the photo.

Think of the soccer team wearing black armbands for the nationwide 1970 anti-war moratorium. Picture sidewalks around the school being crowded with students nearly every day, sometimes more than once, from some idiot dedicated to pulling false fire alarms.

Combine that with the usual hormone-driven angst of mid-to-late teens and it was something to get over.

It doesn't really seem like yesterday, I'm thinking as I drive to a preliminary party in the old hometown. It's a Friday night and I'm recalling how cliquy high school was; how the few hours of a reunion can be anxiety inducing and how it would be so much easier to turn around.

I contemplate the reasons why my old next-door neighbor and his high school sweetheart, now wife of about 35 years, have never made a reunion. My thoughts move to another friend, a learned philosopher and now a regional church leader, with whom I camped at a 1973 rock 'n' roll concert that attracted 600,000 in Watkins Glen, N.Y., who also never attended a reunion.

But then I turn to the core of classmates who stayed in town or made it a point to try to keep the reunions going. Outside of this milieu, I know many of my contemporaries, most of them actually, long ago lost touch with those who shared their high school years.

I park the car and walk into the bar, located on a city golf course that had an entirely different name when we were hacking around it with cheap clubs bought with money from our high school jobs.

The first person I see is one of my old soccer teammates. Of course he's grayer and a little heavier, but his eyes and smile are the same, as are those of all I knew way back when. Then comes the first of many hugs. I breathe easier, like I do every five years when I show up at these things. It's a cocktail party of friends, acquaintances and bemused spouses that steels me for the next night's dinner dance.

Of course I get lost trying to find the downtown hotel. Well, not lost, just stuck on a one-way stretch of downtown as I steam past the hotel, over there on the port side, along what was centuries ago the important Boston Post Road, until I can throw a U-turn.

There's a line at the bar: always a good sign. There's an undercurrent of laughter and recognition as I pick up the name tag, featuring an impossibly young head-and-shoulders shot of me at 17. That tie! Those bangs! The next five hours are a blur of catching up.

An hour into it the dining room is opened to reveal festive black-and-orange centerpieces for about 150 attendees. The young DJs are tip-toeing around some '70s hits that they must have scoured off the Internet, so I won't be hearing The Kinks' "Sunny Afternoon." But it's OK because I want to converse, not listen to music, anyway.

People are accomplished. They have opinions. They're worried about their country and their families. They're aware of our mortality and the darkness that some old friends and many parents have entered.

We know that time, which seemed to stretch out so far 40 years ago, is now limited and that every day is important.

We're [Stamford High School's Class of 1972](#).

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