

INAUGURAL ISSUE



WPHS Alumni News

Volume 1, Number 1

West Philadelphia High School Alumni Association

July 2010

August 'WestFest' picnic to support membership drive

The third annual WestFest Picnic in support of the Alumni Association's Membership Drive, is scheduled for Sunday August 1, at the North George's Hill pavilion, in Fairmount Park.

Festivities--including music provided by a DeeJay--will kick off at noon and will end at 6pm.

All alumni of the School and their families are invited. There is no charge, but the Association will encourage all alumni to join. A one-year membership is \$20; a Lifetime membership is \$200.

Alumni should bring their own food, or the necessary equipment to prepare their food on-site.

T-shirts and other items will be available for donations to the Association.

Four portable toilets will also be provided.

See *WestFest*, page 2

New school being built nearby; To replace present building



Architect's rendering of the new school being built at 49th and Chestnut Streets

1st class set for September 2011

Work has begun on the new West Philadelphia High School, at 49th and Chestnut Streets. The first class is expected to enter in September 2011, 99 years after the first class entered the present building.

The school is being built on the 4.5-acre site of the former West Catholic High School for Boys, and will accommodate about 1000 pupils. The present site handled more than 3000, before the school population was reduced and the third and fourth floors were closed off.

As befitting a new structure, the

See *SCHOOL*, page 2

WELCOME

This is the first issue of the new Alumni Association's report to members. It is being sent to all the names on our mailing list. Future issues will be sent only to members of the Association. If you are not a member, fill in and return the Membership Form on page 3.

Bogus website collecting 'dues'

It has come to the attention of the Alumni Association that there is a bogus site collecting \$10 membership dues.

Please note that the Alumni Association does not collect dues

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Bowling night aids Scholarship Fund

More than one-hundred West Philadelphia High School alumni and friends converged on the Gehris Lanes in Upper Darby on April 23 in what has become an annual fundraiser--Bowling for Scholarships.

The atmosphere, though, was more of a fun-raiser as the sound of balls striking pins--or not--mixed with the dee jay's solid spins. Before long there was as much line-dancing and old-school bopping as there was bowling, and with the gourmet hoagies procured from K&A Sandwiches owned by West Philly alums, the Browns, even the palate got in on the act.

Then a limo pulled up and

deposited a dozen or so alumni who were a tad over-dressed in head-to-toe semi-formal garb. It turns out they'd just left a senior prom--"senior" here means over fifty. That was especially fitting because, after raising enough to give \$500 each to Joshua Davis, attending Lincoln University, and Shanise Henry attending Central Pennsylvania College, the bowling evening generated just enough to spare to pay for prom dresses and tickets for two deserving seniors who otherwise would not have been able to attend the School's senior prom this year.

That's striking it one-hundred percent for good causes all

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Hardy Williams dies; Politician, civic leader

Philadelphia lost one of its finest citizens, and the school lost one of its outstanding graduates with the death of Hardy Williams (June '48), in January at the age of 78.

An outstanding athlete at West Philadelphia, he starred in baseball, basketball, and football for three years and captained the latter two teams in his senior year.

At Penn State, he became the first African-American to play on the basketball team.

Williams served as an Air Force lieutenant in Korea, before earning his law degree from the University of Pennsylvania.

He served in the State House of Representatives from 1971 to 1973 and from 1977 to 1982, then as a State senator from 1983 to 1998, when he retired, and was

succeeded in the office by his son Anthony.

But, possibly his lasting legacy is that he is credited with paving the way for African-Americans to become mayor and hold other high offices in the city, when he, himself, ran for mayor in the 1971 Democrat Party primary, losing to Frank Rizzo.

A generation of Black leaders worked for Williams in one way or other, and his success as a mentor may be ascribed in the advice he gave those who worked for him: "Keep the people's interest first--before politics, power, money, even friendship."

Williams was an active member of the original Alumni Association, serving on its Board for many years.

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President Paula McKinney-Rainey
Editor Andrew Kevorkian

From the President. . .

On behalf of the leadership team and editor, I am delighted to introduce the Inaugural Newsletter of the WPHS Alumni Association.

For a little background: in February 2007, a student assaulted a teacher; the Principal, loved by students, was reassigned; students rebelled and acted out; fires were set; and the media descended on the school. The majority of good, hard-working students were being stereotyped as trouble-makers and not worthy of decent education.

When a small group of us came together six weeks later, it was a wake-up call; we could not remain on the sidelines. We knew that individually, our impact would be minimal, but a strong Alumni Association could be a legitimate voice, force and support for the students at WPHS who deserve a meaningful education. We set out to revitalize the Association that was first chartered in 1952.

We developed by-laws, updated our filing with the PA Department of State, held elections for Officers and Board, building the infrastructure for a vital, dynamic organization. At the same time, we immediately set out to bring alumni back to the school, hosting four annual Career Day events; opened an office in the school, staffed three days a week during the school year; facilitated a peer-mediation training over two consecutive Saturdays; sponsored a full-day site-visit to the regional electric transmission facility. This year, as last, we were able to provide



Association president Paula McKinney-Rainey (second from right) was among the dignitaries at the ceremonial groundbreaking for the new school

The Officers and Board of the Association

The unfortunate period of inactivity of the Alumni Association of the West Philadelphia High School has ended, and the resurrected Association has become very active on a variety of fronts, as this issue of the **WPHS Alumni News**, reports.

The Officers of the Association are: Paula McKinney-Rainey, 1969, President; Michael Brown, 1969, Vice-President; Cheryl A. Smith, 1975, Recording Secretary; Andrew Johnson, 1980, Treasurer.

The Members of the Board are: Norman Brown, Esq., 1970, Chairman; and Glenn Bryan, 1970; Diane McKinney Whetstone, 1971; Jeanette McPherson Taylor, 1971; Eric Ward, 1971; Dr. Delores Williams, 1969.

WestFest, from page 1

Michael Brown, Paula McKinney-Rainey, and Cheryl Smith are the Co-Chairs of the Committee, and they are aided by Raymond Adams, Sid Blunt, Francine Cooper, Gerald Dorsey, Connie Gordon, Andrew Johnson, Dr. Delores Williams, and Ernest Wilson.

two Book Awards for graduating seniors.

As we look forward to the new school year, we acknowledge Ms Saliyah Cruz and wish her the best in her new assignment, while we enthusiastically welcome Ozzie Wright, Class of 1968, as he re-takes the helm at WPHS!

To all of you, we and our students need you to become a part of the community of support that we were privileged to have when we were students at WPHS. They are our legacy, because we will always be graduates of West Philadelphia High School!

Paula McKinney-Rainey

School, from page 1

new three-story school will have the latest state-of-the-art features, including science labs, a theater, computer rooms, and two gymnasiums.

In recent years, the teaching system at the school was organized into "academies"—automotive, business and technology, creative and performing arts, and urban leadership. The automotive academy will remain at its present location, near the old building—a half-block away on Hanson St.

Many of the school's amenities and features are a result of what present pupils learned after visits to some of the highly regard schools in the country.

The new structure will cost \$66-million, according to the Philadelphia School District.

The present building, which had never been renovated, is one of the oldest school buildings in the city, the oldest of the then-revised school system, and the first high school west of the Schuylkill River.

Wright back at School as principal for 3rd turn

Ozzie Wright, a graduate of the Class of 1968, returns to the School as its principal for the third time. He will take up his duties in September.

Mr. Wright, who was very popular and well-liked by the pupils, was principal in 2002-03 before he was called to active duty with the U.S. Army, and served in Iraq. He later served as Principal in the 2006-07 year, after the School went through a very difficult period of fights, fires, and violence.

Most recently, he was the interim principal at South Philadelphia High School which also had prob-

See **WRIGHT**, page 4

Reunions set

June, 1945 -- 67th-anniversary reunion is being planned for 2011. Contact Maureen Chaby, 610.642.0864, for details.

Feb., 1950 -- 60th-anniversary reunion. Contact 215.884.8475, for details.

June, 1970 -- 40th-anniversary reunion, Oct. 23, 2010. Contact Byron Williams, 301.343.3259, or Norman Brown, 267.230.3610, for details.

June, 1980 -- 30th-anniversary reunion set for October 23, at Airport Ramada Inn. Contact Wade Gordon, 215.828.6338, for details.

Judge Merriweather, Never forgot WPHS

He may have been a high-ranking judge of the Municipal Court, but Ronald Bernard Merriweather always had time for West Philadelphia High School, and his death in June leaves a vacuum that will be hard to fill.

Judge Merriweather was graduated in June 1956. A track-and-field athlete, while in school, he was a member of the cross-country team that won the Public League Championship in 1955.

Over the years, Judge Merriweather returned to the school as a Commencement Speaker and also as a Keynote Speaker at various class reunions.

With the Municipal Court for 25 years, Judge Merriweather was the supervising judge in the criminal division, when he retired at 70, in 2008. However, he continued to sit as a senior judge until becoming ill, last year.

He also taught law at Temple University and the Berean Institute.

Before he became a judge in the early 1980s, he had several careers in one phase or other of law enforcement. From 1962 to 1965, he was an agent with the Federal Bureau of Narcotics in Cleveland, and, from 1965 to 1968, he was a U.S. Secret

See **JUDGE**, page 4

Obituaries

Violet Branch Johnson

Violet Branch Johnson (June '34), church and community activist and public-relations executive, died in January, aged 94.

She joined the Girls Friendly Society of the Episcopal Church, at 13, and served it for more than 50 years, singing in the choir, providing piano accompaniment, and taught at the Sunday School and, later, organizing concerts and mentoring younger members. While in her teens, she helped in the church office and eventually became church secretary.

When she joined the Blue Cross, in 1948, she was the first African-American to be hired. She processed claims and eventually became a supervisor and also represented Blue Cross at events in the Black community.

In 1969, Mrs. Johnson joined the Mark Hyman Associates, a public-relations and marketing agency and as an account executive and, later, a partner, she brokered contracts with local corporations to extend their presence in the African-American community. She also represented clients at Career Fairs for Black students. In 1973, she was a founding member of the Philadelphia Association of Black Journalists which became the founding chapter of the National Association of Black Journalists two years later. She was an officer and committee member of the National Association of Negro Business and Professional Women.

For more than 60 years, while living in her South Philadelphia home, she was block captain of her street and actively protested

George X. Schwartz

George X. Schwartz (June '32), one of the most powerful Philadelphia politicians for more than 20 years, died in March, at the age of 95.

After earning his undergraduate and law degrees from Temple University, he began his political career almost immediately, serving in the 34th Ward, in Overbrook, eventually rising to be Ward Leader. In 1952, he was elected to the State House of Representatives, but lost the seat two years later, but won it back two years later serving until 1960 when he was elected a Councilman in the City.

He served in the Council for 20 years, rising to become Council President for the last eight years. During that time, he was noted for his "iron-fisted" rule.

A distinguished-looking man, wearing finely-tailored suits, he was nicknamed "The Silver Fox" because of his neatly-cropped graying hair.

His career came to an ignominious end when he was involved in an FBI "sting" operation. After a lengthy trial, he was convicted and eventually served a one-year-and-one-day sentence.

against the increase in the number of bars. She organized annual events and trips and expanded cultural opportunities for her neighbors.

Val Avery

Val Avery (June '43), who appeared in more than 100 films and appeared on television more than 300 times, died in December, at the age of 85.

Because of what was described as his "craggy features and threatening aura," he played tough-guy cops, thugs, Mafia kingpins, and as a Russian dissident assassin in a film which he was the main character but during which he spoke no lines.

Born Sebouh derAbrahamian, he acted locally in amateur productions before entering the Army as a flight instructor, during World War II.

Upon his return, after the war, he entered the Bessie V. Hicks School of Drama. He moved to New York City and began working in live television in Westerns and Crime series.

His first film role was in "The Harder They Fall," which was Humphrey Bogart's last film, in 1956.

His film credits include: "The Anderson Tapes," "The Pope of Greenwich Village," "Hud," "Hombre," "The Laughing Policeman," "Donnie Brasco," "Let's Do It Again."

A close friend of John Cassavetes, Avery appeared in five of his films, as well as in episodes Cassavetes directed in television series.

Avery's most out-of-character roles were as the corset salesman

Thelma Packman Gray

Thelma Packman Gray (June '36), a pioneering powerhouse in advertising and public relations, died in December, aged 91.

In 1945, she joined Gray & Rogers, one of the city's largest advertising agencies, and went on to establish its public-relations division, which she headed.

Later, when serving as a consultant to the firm, after resigning as a partner following her marriage to one of the firm's founders, Jerome Gray, she organized a women's division at the firm. She explained the action as logical since so much marketing is directed at women it made sense to have specialists doing the directing.

After she had resigned from Gray & Rogers, in addition to serving as a consultant to the firm, she also had her own agencies during the 1970s and 1980s.

Her awards included a Silver Medal from the American Advertising Federation and a Silver Anvil from the Public Relations Society of America.

She was a member of the Philadelphia Public Relations Association's Hall of Fame, and had been cited in "Editor and Publisher" as one of five people who had done the most to develop public relations as a profession.

who appears early in "The Magnificent Seven," and, on stage, in 1998, when he appeared as the beloved grandfather in "Over the River and Through the Woods."

WEST PHILADELPHIA HIGH SCHOOL ALUMNI ASSOCIATION Membership Form

Yes, I wish to join the West Philadelphia High School Alumni Association

I wish to join for Life. I enclose my one-time payment of \$200.

I wish to join on an Annual basis. I enclose my first payment of \$20. I understand that the dues "year" is from September to August.

I was graduated within the past three years, and I wish to join at the special \$5 rate.

Name _____ Class _____
(First) (Maiden) (Last)

Address _____

(ZIP Code) _____

Telephone _____ E-mail _____

Make check or Money Order
payable to:
West Philadelphia High School
Alumni Association

Mail form and dues to:
WPHS Alumni Association,
P.O. Box 7906
Philadelphia, PA 19101

4th Career Day Program draws 20 alumni speakers

The Alumni Association's fourth annual Career Day Program, in March, introduced seniors to the variety of careers open to them.

Rotating between classes, 20 alumni chatted with the students and shared insights on their working lives.

Speaking during their morning classes, the alumni explained the skills necessary for the work they are doing or they did, and what training was needed for them to move up the employment ladder.

Alumni with a diversity of professions, from civil and mechanical engineering to education and health, offered interesting real-life perspectives on their career paths.

SCAM, from page 1

via an online process, and we do not offer a \$10 membership. We offer Life Memberships for \$200 and Annual Memberships for \$20.

You can only become a paid member of the Association by completing our official membership form (see page 3, or on our website: www.wphsaa.org) and submitting as noted on the form.

We also have our Annual Membership Drive (WestFest) each August in Fairmount Park.

(For the record, the bogus site is: www.alumniclass.com/westphiladelphia . DO NOT JOIN THIS GROUP. We repeat, IT IS NOT ASSOCIATED WITH your West Philadelphia High School Alumni Association.

School receives grant to motivate students

A federal grant of \$960,355 has been awarded to West Philadelphia High School to "build a safe learning environment where young people can focus on achieving their dreams," according to Congressman Chaka Fattah, who secured the grant.

The money comes from the United States Department of Labor and is especially aimed at programs-vulnerable ninth-graders, potential dropouts, and other at-risk young people. It will be used to develop programs to motivate them to stay in school and to see high school as a stepping stone to higher education and success in later life.

West Philadelphia High School, unfortunately, has been named a "failing school" because of its poor academic record.

JUDGE, from page 2

Service agent. His assignments included trips to Africa with Vice President Hubert H. Humphrey.

After graduating from the University of California, Los Angeles, Law School, he was an attorney for the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. He opened a law office in Philadelphia in 1976 and established a reputation as a criminal attorney.

Request

Please send us news—yours, your class's, other alumni.

Electricity-grid visit sponsored by Association

As part of its involvement with the students at the School, the Alumni Association sponsored a visit to the PJM Interconnection Site, in Norristown, in November.

PJM Interconnection is a federally-regulated Regional Transmission Organization that co-ordinates the movement of wholesale electricity in all or part of 13 states and the District of Columbia, and is the largest centrally-dispatched grid in North America.

Forty college-bound or college-eligible students were given the opportunity to gain an insight into the inner workings and opportunities available in the Energy markets, specifically the electrical-energy market. In addition to a tour of the facility, the students were given the opportunity to meet with some of the staff and learn "who we are, what we do, and how we got here."

The four members of the Alumni Association who accompanied the students were: Paula McKinney-Rainey, Michael Brown, Jeanette Taylor, and Luther Collins, and they were met by PJM's Ross Kendall, Class of 1972, who initiated the trip and served as host.

BOWLING, from page 1

around.

Michael Brown was the Chair of the Committee whose members were: Francine Cooper, Andrew Johnson, Paula McKinney-Rainey, and Cheryl Smith.

School's hybrid-auto team loses in final round of trials

The School's four-door and two-door hybrid entries in the Progressive Insurance Automotive X-Prize Competition were eliminated in the final round of trials.

Of the 111 original entries in the competition, the West Philadelphia team was the only high school among the 22 finalists, defeating well-funded organizations and such technical universities as Cornell and M.I.T.

Under its director/mentor Simon Hauger, the team is comprised of students in the School's Academy of Automotive and Mechanical Engineering, housed in a garage on nearby Hanson St.

The team received a send-off by the City, when it was honored at an open-air press conference at City Hall's Dilworth Plaza, by Mayor Michael Nutter, June 16.

WRIGHT, from page 2

lems with discipline of the pupils.

While the discipline problems appear at West Philadelphia seem to have been solved, the School has been failing academically, according to a spokesman for School Superintendent Arlene Ackerman, who went on to say that Mr. Wright was felt to be the best person who would help the School's proficiency. It was reported, recently, that the School's State-standardized test scores were poor, with only two percent of juniors on grade level in math and 16 percent in reading.

Address Correction Requested

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