

## **The Space Between**

As Wellesley Says Goodbye To Its Old High School, Some Problems Still Linger  
By Rhys Heyden

There are two high schools currently occupying the lot at 50 Rice Street in Wellesley, Massachusetts.

One will be demolished next summer, and the other will open in February 2012. One is full of decades of cherished memories, and the other is empty. One is falling apart, and the other is the gleaming, towering embodiment of Wellesley's educational future.

As the town's physical educational identity is in limbo, so too is its educational ethos, beset by scandal on one side, and filled with promise and proud tradition on the other.

During Thanksgiving week in 2011, Wellesley High School students, teachers, alumni, and staff spanning 73 years gathered to say a final goodbye to their old high school amidst the prevailing climate of educational upheaval.

### **Turning Out The Lights**

It is nigh impossible to tell the story of Wellesley High School without first telling the story of Jeanie Goddard. Goddard came to WHS in the fall of 1965 as a student teacher, and finally retired 40 years later as a beloved English teacher and Wellesley icon.

It was Goddard who had the idea to commemorate the old WHS building with a weeklong celebration, and Goddard who volunteered countless hours to organize the events that came, collectively, to be known as "Turn Out The Lights."

"I didn't even think about saying no," said Beth Carrillo Thomas (WHS '80), the volunteer producer of the TOTL Performing Arts Showcase, "No one can say no to Jeanie Goddard."

Highlights of TOTL included the showcase featuring alumni musicians, an "open house" of the old school with historical WHS artifacts on display and for sale, and a panel and seminar day featuring distinguished WHS alums.

On Friday evening, before WHS flooded with thousands of alumni attending Saturday's open house and showcase, Goddard was hard at work organizing Wellesley artifacts in the empty gymnasium. As the sun set outside, the white-haired Goddard shuffled back and forth across the wooden court in her pink Crocs, carrying boxes of old Wellesley yearbooks, jerseys, and school newspapers to be displayed.

"She just doesn't stop," said one of the exhausted TOTL volunteers sitting at half-court, "she's like the Energizer bunny."

"Everyone on this thing is a volunteer," said Goddard. "Personally, I said to myself, 'I have to do this for Wellesley.'"

**"Where Do We Want This Town To Be?"**

While Wellesley has prepared to celebrate its proud educational history, a lengthy chain of recent scandals has painted a different picture.

In March 2011, Wellesley Public School officials released data indicating the school system was owed nearly \$170,000 in outstanding lunch fees. This revelation has proven to be the crack in a dam that has since burst.

In Sept. 2011, Chartwells, Wellesley's new private food service vendor, accrued a number of critical health violations, and former cafeteria workers came forward to blame Ruth Quinn Berdell, the school business manager, for the lunch debt.

That same month saw the sudden disappearance of roughly \$20,000 worth of Apple equipment from the middle school, and the arrest of Gino Lister, a WMS custodian, in connection with the theft. Later, investigative work by *The Wellesley Townsman* revealed that Lister was hired by the Wellesley school system despite having a substantial criminal record and purportedly undergoing a CORI check.

On Nov. 10, Bella Wong, Wellesley's superintendent, announced she would resign at the end of the school year, citing "ongoing public concern over school operational protocol" in a public letter. Berdell was placed on voluntary paid administrative leave eight days later.

To top it off, on Nov. 30, the Wellesley Department of Health revealed that both the middle school and high school have been dealing with rodent infestations since August.

Though town officials acknowledged the gravity of these scandals, they also emphasized their intent to move on.

"The [Wellesley] School Committee is keeping our focus on education," said Suzy Littlefield, chair of the WSC. "Education is going on in all ten schools, and we have an amazing set of principals, so those issues with the business office haven't affected the education. There is a lot of pride in each building."

"I look at this as positive and good," said Katherine "Gig" Babson, a member of the Wellesley Board of Selectman and chair of the High School Building Committee. "The community has the ability to come together and determine the direction they think the school system should take. These opportunities - fresh new looks - don't come that often."

"I think these are issues that, of course, have to be dealt with, but we can't lose sight of the much bigger question of: 'Where do we want this town to be?' It's just going to take some time," said Babson.

## **The Return**

On the morning of Saturday, Nov. 26, the sun in a cloudless sky starkly lit Wellesley's two high schools. The new school, all smooth edges and sparkling glass, towered over the weary-looking brick and chipped paint of the old school.

“It’s a beautiful new building, but it’s not lavish,” said Babson. “From that perspective, I’m very hopeful and I think people are going to like it. That being said, I think it will be an emotional time for people when the old school comes down.”

Though the new school will have its opening day in February 2012, this day belonged to the old WHS.

Thousands of alumni, ranging from the Class of 1939 to the Class of 2011, as well as current students, teachers, and Wellesley residents wandered the hallowed halls on Saturday, saying goodbye.

“I guess what brought me back to the old school, with so much history and so many memories that’s falling apart and we complain about but we all really secretly love, maybe, is just to be in it one more time before they knock it down,” said Claire Grosel, a 2010 WHS graduate. “I miss it, and I don’t.”

Rooms in the English wing featured mini-exhibits of old yearbooks, archived newspaper clippings, athletic trophies, and novels written by alumni. The event was catered, pro bono, by a variety of alumni restaurateurs in the jam-packed WHS cafeteria.

“Saturday afternoon was just plain fun. I mean, 4,000 people in the old school and everybody just had a big grin on their face; that was just great. I’m so glad I got a chance to see it all. It was a little bit bittersweet,” said Suzy Littlefield.

“It was kind of a love-fest,” said Goddard. “It far surpassed my dreams.”

## **The Future**

Despite the tumult and some sadness over the demolition of the old WHS, there was widespread optimism for the future of education in Wellesley among TOTL attendees.

“I am heartbroken they weren’t able to save the old 1938 building, because it’s such a beautiful building,” said Goddard. “It’s going to take a while for the new school to achieve its own sense of self as a building, but a school is much more than bricks and mortar - it’s the relationship between the teachers and students that is really at the center.”

At the end of the performing arts showcase on Saturday night, Goddard enthusiastically hopped up on stage.

“Turn out the lights!” she instructed.

Suddenly, it was very dark in the old Wellesley High School auditorium. Most everyone, though, seemed to know exactly where they were going.