

# 'Just like a big family'

Sandburg High School welcomes 50 years of alumni home

By Jason Freeman  
Correspondent

Perhaps the one thing that 1963 Sandburg alumnus Bob Smith remembers most about the high school is the sense of family he felt while he attended the Palos Township high school.

As a right half-back for the Sandburg Eagles football team, Smith's time at the school was nothing short of exciting.

But when family trouble arose, Sandburg teacher Bob Gadt was there to offer fatherly advice and a place to stay.

"He took me in," Smith said.

"Most of the staff would introduce me as Bob Gadt's son. The unspoken love and support that the staff was showing me, you just can't put that in words. They meant so much to so many different students."

Smith and thousands of graduates gathered Friday night on school grounds for Homecoming — and Sandburg's 50th anniversary.

An alumni tent gave graduates a starting point for the night's perks, which included a special section in the stands, loudspeaker recognition before the game and tours through the school.

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Don Wilkin of Orland Park accepts a Frisbee from Jennifer Mulheran at the homecoming game Friday at Sandburg High School. The school celebrated its 50th year of existence with football, tours and plenty of free goodies for the thousands of alumni who were visiting.

Matt Marton/  
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## Sandburg

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Alumni were given buttons, Frisbees, key chains and, most importantly at a loud football game, plastic bullhorns to cheer their school on.

"Football was a big memory for me here," said Eric Welsh, a 1994 graduate and defensive end. "Some people look at the school and think a lot of things have changed, but when you come in and spend a little time here, you realize nothing's changed at all. There's comfort here when you come back."

Like Smith, Welsh has fond memories of playing football and enjoying a close relationship with his teachers.

"There's really nothing like Friday night under the lights," he said. "It's a great environment to be a part of, whether as a player, a fan or coach. I've been friends with coach (Marty) Balle for 15 years, and I've stayed in close contact with him and his family."

Charolett Cummings came to Sandburg in 1955 as a sophomore and met her future husband. Although she dropped out to marry him, a Sandburg teacher took her into his confidence to help her make the tough decision.

"My home-ec teacher actually came to my house and tried to get me to stay in school," she said. "The people who attended here and the friendships that were made were great. Mr. Hopkins, my math teacher, was great, and it's nice to see him here tonight. The teaching staff was more just like a big family."

Don Hopkins, who taught science and math from 1954 to 1965, had plenty of his own stories to tell.

"One night, during a night football game, we decided we'd get a P.A. system going," he said. "I brought a lab amplifier from the physics lab and set it up in the bleachers. Every time

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ASSOCIATE PRINCIPAL GLENN WOOD

I announced, I got shocked, because it wasn't properly grounded."

One night, while working late with students in the lab, a thunderstorm knocked out power.

"The kids were all holding snakes in their hands," he said. "And all of a sudden the lights went out, and everyone screamed. (The snakes) were harmless, of course."

"But it was fun to teach here, and the kids were a lot of fun, too."

The reunion was part of larger plan to honor Sandburg graduates of the past. Throughout the school year, several events including a basketball game, plays, choir, orchestra are geared toward bringing back alumni.

A video will feature interviews with alumni. Two rooms, one dedicated to the school and the other to Carl Sandburg himself, are in the process of being created.

Named for the poet in 1954, the school has seen its enrollment rise from 80 students to 3,000, officials said.

"This is something that we would like to continue, to bring people back into the community," said Sandburg Associate Principal Glenn Wood, who organized the reunion. "Something I've realized in my time here at Sandburg is that there's a strong feeling in the community about the school. People feel a sense of belonging to Sandburg, as witnessed by the amount of people who showed up tonight."