

A small historical exhibit to commemorate visits of future U.S. Presidents Kennedy and Obama was unveiled at the high school in October 2011.

## Open Doors *and* Open Minds

*Notable guests stretch students' worldview beyond Barrington 220.*

ONE MONDAY MORNING MANY YEARS AGO, when I was a freshman at Notre Dame High School in Niles, the principal announced that U.S. Sen. Ted Kennedy would visit our school to speak to students later in the week. At an all-boys Catholic high school, an appearance by any member of the Kennedy family was a big deal. JFK had been president; Robert had been a U.S. senator and attorney general and, had he not been assassinated in 1968, he, too, may have become president. Ted was the last surviving Kennedy brother and was considering a run for the White House. For a young high school freshman interested in politics, this was exciting news.

The day of Sen. Kennedy's visit is one I will always remember. The high school gymnasium had been secured by the Secret Service. The gym doors were locked and students waited in classrooms for

the announcement to go to the gym upon the senator's arrival. Since I was in the band, we were told to get ready early so we could play a fanfare as Sen. Kennedy made his entrance. I was so excited. Although at this point in my life I really didn't know if I was a Democrat or a Republican, I understood that this might be my one chance to meet a person like Sen. Kennedy, who walked in worlds that a kid from Niles could hardly imagine.

At that time, there was a small door in a remote corner of the Notre Dame gymnasium that led directly to the band room. Ironically, it was the one door Secret Service agents had not checked that day. After preparing my saxophone, I laid it down and snuck into the empty gym to get a glimpse of the set-up. There was a large banner welcoming the senator; it was so cool.

Slowly, I took a few more steps before a deep,

strong voice saying, "Freeze!" stopped me in my tracks. Immediately, five men in dark, grey suits surrounded me, wondering how I had breached their sealed environment. Quickly assessing the situation, I think they were angrier with themselves for missing that one door than they were at me. The event went on despite the security incident. I played my sax, the senator spoke, waved, shook hands, and departed. It remains a day I will never forget.

That experience was good for me and undoubtedly bolsters my belief that students should have the opportunity to interface with individuals who speak from state, national, and international stages. In its long history, for example, Barrington High School has welcomed numerous notable individuals for events where students have had the option to attend. Then Sen. John F. Kennedy



U.S. Sen. John F. Kennedy spoke on the front steps of Barrington High School just two weeks before his election as President in October 1960.

visited BHS in 1960, just two weeks prior to his election as president. And before he became our current president, Sen. Barack Obama also met with students at the high school in 2006.

More recently, Sen. Richard Durbin, U.S. representatives Melissa Bean and Joe Walsh, and former Speaker of the House, Newt Gingrich, also spoke in Barrington 220. In April, we hosted a public forum where two prominent Illinois leg-

islators, David McSweeney (R-52nd District) and Christian Mitchell (D-26th District) contrasted very different suburban and urban political issues. Barrington High School has also welcomed military leaders, such as Rear Admiral Jeffrey Harbeson, the commandant of Guantanamo Bay in Cuba, and wartime heroes, including recipients of the Congressional Medal of Honor.

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U.S. Sen. Barack Obama addressed students, staff and community members in the BHS auditorium in April 2006.



Former Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives Newt Gingrich spoke at Barrington High School in March 2012.



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Navy Rear Admiral Jeffrey Harbeson, commandant of Guantanamo Bay, visited with classes at Barrington High School in April 2011.



Bear's great and BHS alumnus, Gary Fencik, visited the high school for an Educational Foundation Legends event in March 2013.

Partnering with the Barrington 220 Educational Foundation and the PTO Presidents Council, we regularly host legendary authors, speakers, and athletes such as BHS alumnus and Chicago Bears standout, Gary Fencik. Other guests have included Holocaust survivors, artists, engineers, scientists, astronauts, poets, Tibetan monks, and, recently, a very non-punctual performer known as Rihanna.



Music celebrity Rihanna made an appearance at the high school to recognize students for their community service in March 2013.

Even apart from campus, we have offered excursions for our students to hear and ask questions of the Dalai Lama, former U.S. President Jimmy Carter, former Soviet Union President Mikhail Gorbachev, and Poland's former president, Lech Walesa. There is a wide swath of politics, lifestyles, and philosophies represented among the many names and groups to which our students have been exposed.

Curiously, whenever we provide an audience for a prominent personality, we are often criticized for endorsing a particular bias or platform. This is never our intent. If it were, one would have a difficult time identifying a congruent stance among the variety of people who have visited Barrington 220.

A school should be a place where young adults are exposed to different worldviews and can meet influential people from beyond our fine community. These interactions stretch students, allowing them to consider their own principles by thinking critically about diverse perspectives. Not every guest may be the perfect role model, but we take seriously our responsibility as educators to model acceptance and openness with appropriate guidance.

Just as I will never forget my encounter with a bevy of secret service agents the day of Sen. Kennedy's visit to Notre Dame High School, the 2,500

BHS students and staff who waited patiently the first day of spring break to see Rihanna will recall that experience for many years. By the way, Rihanna, if you are reading this, there is a quicker route to Barrington from Chicago. Please let me know the next time you are in town, and I'll gladly send a school bus with a driver who can get you here on time.

Seriously, thanks to all the prominent public figures who eventually find their way to Barrington 220. Such visits enrich our students' education, helping to expand the minds and margins of an already great school system. U




PHOTO: THOMAS BALSAMO

DR. TOM LEONARD is the superintendent of Barrington 220 schools. He may be reached at [tleonard@barrington220.org](mailto:tleonard@barrington220.org) or by phone at 847-842-3588.