

Why Should I Attend My Class Reunion?

By Tracey Stoll, Class of '74

When I was in Ames for my 30 year Ames High class reunion, a friend of my mother's (whose daughter is in my class) asked me if I was having a good time. I told her enthusiastically that I was. Then she said, "They get better every time." I've found her observation so true.

Some Ames High alumni wonder what's the point of attending a reunion. Answer: it's what you get out of it. Fun. Empathy. Laughing at ourselves. Grieving for those we've lost. Enthusiastic mutual support. Cheering for others' successes. New friends. Let me illustrate:

The first reunion I attended was 10 years after we had graduated, and I had lived out of state since then. As I wrote my little bio prior to the reunion, I was worried whether my then-current life situation would be viewed with respect. Had I measured up to everyone else?

When I read the booklet that was produced with each of our stories, many of us were just gaining traction with our life paths. (Whew!) There were also some classmates who shared very difficult, life-changing events they had experienced. They were honest, and they had survived tough times. Some of our classmates had not survived. Even at age 28, we experienced the sorrow of losing our peers, some of whom we'd grown up with.

The upshot of that 10 year class reunion was that we had a fun, fun, fun weekend. Not only with good friends, but also being in a social setting with others who we kind of knew in school, but not well. And even though we had not been buddies, we discovered that we had been appreciated and liked, and we had fond memories of each other. Funny stories came out. I have a personal favorite funny story, but I'm saving it to share at our 45 year reunion in Sept.

The 20 year reunion was more relaxed. We were more settled and just enjoyed seeing those "old" familiar faces. And those that were not so familiar. Thank goodness we had name tags that year! We had a picnic on Sunday morning and people brought their kids and spouses. It was fun to see the families that had sprung up in our midst. A couple of classmates who connected at that reunion ended up getting married.

The 30 year reunion was when people REALLY started looking different. Going into it, some of us had worried about our weight gain, hair loss, gray hair, needing reading glasses, etc. But it was instantly obvious that we were in good company. And none of that mattered any more. More of our classmates had passed away. It was great to be alive, and to learn what was new with others. The high school cliques had dissolved, and friendships from even earlier years bubbled to the surface. It didn't matter what anyone did for a living, or their life circumstances. There was a LOT of laughter at that reunion. And at least three couples got together as a result of that time together.

After the 30 year reunion, Facebook took us by storm. Our Facebook "friends" numbers boomed as more and more of us connected in that medium. We got better acquainted, learning about hobbies, families, where people lived, etc. We rallied around those who

became seriously ill. One classmate had a liver transplant. The daily outpouring of love, healing wishes, encouragement and constant support on Facebook was a big boost for that classmate, who is in great health today. Our class, and several others, have their own "Ames High Class of --" Facebook pages. It's a great forum for staying connected.

Then the 40 year reunion. Amazing experience. People attended who hadn't been around. People came who hadn't ended up graduating with us. People who had always seemed shy and quiet became more visible as a part of the group, and discovered that they, too, were appreciated during those formative years. One guy came who hadn't been around for decades and nobody recognized him. He looked like a movie star. But he is a rocket scientist!

By this time – and I don't mean to sound overly mushy here, but it's true – the love was palpable. That caring support, cheering for each other, had increased exponentially. And more had left us. (I confess that I cried through the entire beautifully produced video featuring our deceased classmates.)

A year after the 40 year reunion, one of our classmates suddenly died. He had not attended our reunions in decades. Four of us from our class came together to attend his memorial service near Phoenix. None of us had hung out together in high school, nor had any of us ever been close to him. But we all knew who he was. Two classmates each drove 45 miles to be there. We were the only people there, other than his brother, who had been a part of his youth. After the service we went out for lunch. Once again, it felt great to be alive and to be able to share memories, laugh, and hear about what's going on in each others' lives. This never would have happened if we four hadn't been at the reunion a year earlier. We had become friends without the social divisions of high school.

At the final event of our 40 year reunion, several people asked the organizing committee to not wait for a 50 year. We wanted a 45 year reunion. We were enjoying each other so much that we didn't want it to end. So this year we're having a 45 year gathering in September, instead of in July. (What? A class reunion without mosquitoes and soupy humid heat?) We are reaching out to everyone we can find who didn't graduate with us, but whom we knew and loved and hope to have among us. All are welcome.

It's okay to come to a class reunion if you've never been to one, or if you haven't been in touch with any classmates in decades. Or if you're an introvert, or shy, and only knew two people in your class well. Or if you don't remember anyone from your class. You don't need be on Facebook to get connected. You will be embraced by your classmates, I promise. We have missed you. We want to see you and catch up on your life. We want to become friends.

Although our individual worlds have changed, we know that our life foundations were in part molded by our classmates and shared experiences in high school. And now by-gones are by-gone. Where there may have been competitiveness, resentment, jealousy and hurt in our teenage years, there is a sense that life has moved past those old energy-sapping feelings. As I said, it's great to be alive. And to have "old" friends.