

Exhibit a walk down memory lane for Centennial

Library exhibit offers a glimpse into the past for current and former Centennial students

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MARCH 8, 2018 03:53 PM



Candrina Bailey, executive director of Coquitlam Heritage, with an old Centennial secondary school annual in front of a display case showing mementoes from the high school, which is being demolished now that a new high school has opened.
Photograph By DIANE STRANDBERG

Whether you were an athlete, a theatre student, a musician, a car enthusiast, a woodworker, a science geek or even a budding newspaper photographer, there was always a space for you at Centennial secondary school.

Those opportunities still exist in the brand new Centennial, which opened its doors in September to more than 1,000 students.

But for thousands more who attended the original school during its 40-year existence, it was a place where they got their start.

And now, many of those students are watching the aging building on Poirier Street in Coquitlam get bulldozed.

It's a bittersweet experience.

"More than any other building that has come down in the city, this one seems to have the biggest impact," said Craig Hodge, a Centennial grad and Coquitlam city councillor.

Before demolition began, Hodge, who's also a former *Tri-City News* photographer, went through the school with members of Coquitlam Heritage Society photographing the different rooms while heritage members scoured the place for mementoes that could be preserved.

Today, some of those items are being shown to the public in the My Coquitlam My Centennial exhibit at the Poirier branch of Coquitlam Public Library — across the street from the old school.

The exhibit, running to Aug. 22, also contains signs, equipment from the science department, class photos, theatre posters, sports equipment, trophies and personal effects, such as annuals and a Centennial flag, from former students.

For Gordon Fulton, Centennial was a place to display his athletic talents, as depicted by his letterman's jacket, while for Allen and Kathie Cornes, it was where they met, played in the band and excelled in school, as exhibited by a scholarship badge.

Martin Novotny also graduated from Centennial and now teaches at the school. In a poster describing his experience, the viewer learns that he was an outsider at first who came out of his shell in the theatre program (Novotny also acts in the Vancouver film business).

As for Hodge, his career in photography got its start with the school paper The Catalyst and in the school darkroom that still existed when he walked through the building last summer.

Now that he has helped preserve some of the school memories with his photos, Hodge is reflective about his high school experience.

“What made Centennial so unique in the '70s when I went there, it operated very much like a college. It had open scheduling... They treated the students as young adults,” he said.

When the school opened in 1967, students trekked from Como Lake middle to the new building and wore all sorts of costumes even though it was the middle of January, an old photograph shows. At the time, students dropped a lead slug with their name into a cairn, which was unearthed in 2013 prior to the new school's reconstruction. The slugs bearing the name of the charter students have been stored for future use, according to school officials, and the Centaur mural, an iconic image for the school, is displayed in the new building.

Candrina Bailey, executive director of Coquitlam Heritage, said a number of larger items have also been collected and stored, including school lockers and a hand-washing station used in the automotive shop.

“We want to preserve these things, it's very important,” Bailey said.

She said she hopes people will view the exhibit, read the personal stories and learn a little about education and life in Coquitlam.

“Any time we have artifacts, they're just things — until you have stories that go with them.”

WHAT'S HAPPENING

An opening reception for the My Coquitlam My Centennial exhibit displaying artifacts from the former Centennial high school will be held Thursday, March 15 from 5:30 p.m. to 6:30 p.m. at the Coquitlam Public Library, Poirier branch, in the Nancy Bennett room. All members of the public are welcome to the opening. Tea, coffee and light snacks will be available.