

Bancroft School's centenary stirs memory of lifelong friendship

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It was the morning of Sept. 8, 1942, the Tuesday after Labour Day. Mort Levy and a group of other kids were running around the hallway in front of Room 6 at Bancroft School as they waited, with their mothers, for the arrival of their Grade 1 teacher, Esther Hoffman. It was the first day of school. Levy, who was “sort of a thin stick of a kid, as my mother would call me,” noticed a boy a bit taller and huskier, with sunburned cheeks and “a big head of hair that seemed to go on forever.” That boy was Phil Gold. The two would become fast friends. And nearly 75 years later the two, eminent McGill University scientists, physicians — Gold is an allergist and immunologist and Levy is a nephrologist, or kidney specialist — and professors both, are still best friends. And in nearly three-quarters of a century, they have never had a real argument.

They will be among the 75 or so alumni, teachers and former staff who will attend a gala cocktail on Thursday to celebrate the centenary of the Plateau Mont-Royal elementary school, designed by architect Percy Nobbs. After having nearly closed more than once because of declining enrolment and other factors, the school has seen a turnaround and is in the midst of a \$5.82-million renovation.

“We thought, what better chance to tell people that the school is still here and relevant?” said Bancroft parent and event planner Vanessa Langevin, who has helped to organize the event.

Today Bancroft, part of the English Montreal School Board, is a multicultural school; 25 to 30 per cent of the population is made up of students whose parents are on work or study visas from countries including Brazil, Chile, Iran and Saudi Arabia, said principal Dorothy Ostrowicz. But back when Gold and Levy were there, the student body was almost exclusively Jewish.

The children of immigrants or immigrants themselves, most lived within a radius of several square blocks around the St-Urbain St. school — Gold lived on St. Laurent Blvd. north of Mont-Royal Ave. and Levy lived on Henri-Julien Ave. — and everybody seemed to know everybody.

All these years later, Gold and Levy, both 80, speak with profound gratitude, awe even, of their teachers and their influence — but seem to have a particular fondness for their Grade 1 teacher, Miss Hoffman.

Gold remembers her as “an extraordinary woman, the height of decorum.

“She wore a grey smock to teach and there was always a handkerchief in her sleeve.”

Levy remembers Hoffman as someone “loving, compassionate and nourishing, who brought magic into the classroom.

“In those days, *Lassie Come Home* was a novel very popular among the kids — the Harry Potter of the day. There was only one copy in the school library and there was a one-year wait. She brought in her own copy and read it to us.”

She also brought in her record player — not many households had them back then — and played *Peter and the Wolf*, Prokofiev’s symphonic fairy tale for children.

The narrator, in their case British actor Basil Rathbone, tells a children’s story and the orchestra illustrates it.

For Levy, “it was magical to sit in a classroom and listen to records.”

Gold called it “my introduction to music.”

A shelf running the width of the classroom at the back was lined with storybooks with coloured pictures.

This was something, because Canada had entered the Second World War in 1939 and chemicals had been diverted for the war effort; most books had black-and-white illustrations.

“Once you had learned to read, she would let you take one home for the weekend,” Levy recalled.

“I was smitten — and I don’t think I have stopped reading since Grade 1. This was one amazing woman.”

Years later, Miss Hoffman would attend Gold’s 1960 wedding ceremony, although she hadn’t been invited, to wish the couple congratulations.

And when he was a resident at the Montreal General Hospital, she would turn up in emergency, unwell, and ask for him.

One reason Levy remembers his youth so clearly, he says, is “that they were such happy years.”

And yet, happy as those early years at Bancroft were, it was impossible not to be aware that, for Jewish children in Europe, it was a terrible time.

“We were the children of immigrants,” Levy recalled. “It was during the war. Although we didn’t understand the full dimension of what was happening, we all knew that things were bad for the Jews. I remember my parents listening to Lorne Greene deliver the news on the CBC.” (Long before he was known as an actor, Greene, who was Jewish, was the principal newsreader on the CBC National News.)

Gold and Levy played baseball and touch football on Fletcher’s Field and watched basketball games and joined youth clubs at the YM-YWHA on Mont-Royal Ave., which played a huge role in the community’s social and cultural life.

“We were both readers and had comparable interests,” Gold recalled. “We were both good students. Periodically, we would get into trouble, but not much.

“One day we decided to take away Row 5. We unscrewed the desks and put them away in the cupboard.”

Then there was the time they locked a fellow student in the cupboard — and the time they all paid their fees in pennies. “At the end of the day, it was great fun.”

In Grade 5, Gold asked the principal, Mr. Muir, whether he really had to attend school, since he had already learned what was being taught — and was given permission to go to the school library when he was bored. There, Gold made the acquaintance of everyone from Leonardo da Vinci to William Shakespeare.

After Bancroft, Gold’s and Levy’s paths remained intertwined.

Both attended Baron Byng High School, and both followed the same career path.

“We had similar personalities,” Levy recalled.

“We were both interested in scholarly, academic things. When we got to McGill, we both fell in love with physiology, and took an honours program, and then went to medicine together. There was this commonality of interests — and nothing seemed to interrupt our friendship all those years.”