

Bancroft School groomed these doctors for success

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Sept. 8, 1942, 8:45 a.m., outside Room 6.

They remember it like yesterday. It was the first day of Grade 1 at Bancroft School for Phil Gold and Mortimer Levy, two boys growing up in the Jewish immigrant district of the Plateau in Montreal, just two blocks away from each other.

They have remained fast friends in the intervening 75 years, and credit the St. Urbain Street school for having a powerful impact on their lives.

Both men, now 80, would become doctors, researchers and professors, achieving eminence in their fields: Gold, a cancer specialist, and Levy, a nephrologist, a destiny neither could have dreamed of at the time.

“It all began here,” Gold said. “We owe Bancroft a great deal.”

They were among alumni and staff from across the decades who gathered at the school on Feb. 16 to celebrate its centennial.

Much has been written about Baron Byng High School’s role in shaping the lives of generations of Jewish youngsters in that neighbourhood through the 1920s to ’50s. But before they moved on to that other St. Urbain Street school, most of them attended Bancroft, then, like Baron Byng, under the Protestant school board.

Unlike Baron Byng, which closed in 1980, Bancroft carries on, now educating children with origins from around the world.

“Bancroft was a safe haven in an environment that could be hostile. We were a minority within in a minority,” Gold said. “The school put us on the right road and gave focus to our lives.”

Levy said it may be hard to imagine nowadays how important the teachers were to them.

“To this day, we talk about our teacher Esther Hoffman as if she were still alive,” said Levy, who unabashedly admits he was in love with her. Hoffman had style and elegance, he recalled.

“She kept a lace hanky in her sleeve, and when chalk got on her fingers, she dusted them off with it,” he said.

They remembered how quickly she taught them to read and instilled in them a love of books that lasted throughout their lives. She kept precious books with colour illustrations in her class (this was wartime, and the chemicals for ink were being diverted to that effort, Levy explained). What’s more, the children could take them home, which was a luxury.

Above all, Hoffman was loving and nurturing. “She would hug you if you got into a problem, something [teachers] probably wouldn’t be allowed to do today,” Levy said.



Drs. Phil Gold, left, and Mortimer Levy pose with former Bancroft principal Artemis Maravei at the school’s centennial celebration.

Gold was precocious and a bit restless.

“In Grade 5, I went to see the principal, Mr. Muir, to tell him I was learning what we learned in the fourth year, and I asked if I had to come to school,” he said. “He explained to me about truant officers and the like, but said that when I got bored I could go to the library. In 1947, that was a remarkable gift.”

Gold, a companion of the Order of Canada, was physician-in-chief of the Montreal General Hospital and chair of the McGill University department of medicine. He continues to practise full time.

Levy, who was head of nephrology at the Royal Victoria Hospital, also remains active as a senior physician.

The two doctors pleaded for Bancroft, the only public school in the Plateau now, to remain open. The English Montreal School Board facility has only avoided closure in recent years as a result of pressure from the increasing number of young families who have moved into the area.

At the reunion, an exhibition of the school’s history, decade by decade, attested to the fact that today’s students and teachers appreciate how ingrained Bancroft was in the Jewish community for at least its first half-century.

Among its other prominent former students are retired senator and business executive Leo Kolber, and Sam Eltes, founder of the Silver Star automobile dealership.

A foundation has been established to help with the updating of the school, and one of the first projects will be the revitalization of the playground.

Bancroft was a large school in its day, opened to ease overcrowding at the Protestant School Board’s Fairmount and Mount Royal elementary schools – long since closed.

Its 29 classrooms and two kindergarten rooms accommodated 1,081 pupils when it opened during World War I.

Current principal Dorothy Ostrowicz points out that Bancroft today is recognized as “the little school with a big heart.” Enrolment is now 273, a sharp increase from 2010 when it stood at 173. ■