

My high school reunion: teen angst, my prom date and the treachery of memory

The pedophile was real — the rest, not so much, Jan Wong discovered at the 50-year reunion of Montreal West High School's class of 1969.

JAN WONG, SPECIAL TO THE MONTREAL GAZETTE ([HTTPS://MONTREALGAZETTE.COM/AUTHOR/JAN-WONG-SPECIAL-TO-THE-MONTREAL-GAZETTE](https://montrealgazette.com/author/jan-wong-special-to-the-montreal-gazette))



Jan Wong asks if her sense of being marginalized at Montreal West High School had merely been generic teenage angst. *DAVE SIDAWAY / MONTREAL GAZETTE*

Some people loved high school; others hated it. The first flock to reunions. The second prefer root canals.

Happily, there's a third type: journalists. So you don't have to be there, we report on SARS, 9/11 terrorist attacks, Tiananmen Square, and now the 50-year reunion of Montreal West High School's class of 1969. (To save you the math, I'm 67.)

I remember almost nothing of high school. I was head girl prefect, but who was head boy? As the sole Chinese-Canadian kid in my year, I felt marginalized. Only Jennifer Chapman, a bassoonist in the band, had ever invited me home, once. Naturally, I bonded with the only other visible minority, Carole Huggins, a black girl. I also defended Bennett Little, the only Jew, when classmates ragged him for supporting Israel during the 1967 Six-Day War.

Half a century later, I assumed little had changed. (Spoiler alert: I was wrong — about lots.)



Jan Wong with peers from Montreal West High School's class of 1969. Wong allows that "my memories had shifted to fit my desired narrative." *DAVE SIDAWAY / MONTREAL GAZETTE*

I didn't remember either co-organizer of the event. They had allotted 15 minutes for speeches. I emailed: Could I say a few words? No, they replied, only the co-organizers would speak.

What could be more high school than that?

Frustrated, I pitched the Montreal Gazette, where I was the shipping reporter so long ago that I had worked with the current photographer's *dad*. An editor suggested asking the organizers, as a courtesy, if they were OK with a photographer.



Jan Wong's yearbook photo from Montreal West High School.
COURTESY OF JAN WONG

That's when the trouble started.

OK, but the photog "should not be present while people are eating." (Must be a WASP hang-up; protocol apparently forbids photos of Queen Elizabeth II chewing.)

I couldn't quote anyone by name, they decreed, "so anything said stays at the reunion." One added: "There is a presumption we will operate on Chatham House Rules."

I Googled that. In 1927 London policy-makers created anonymity rules for discussing controversial topics. But we were a senior citizens' reunion, not the

Royal Institute of International Affairs.

"If you are hoping to make this 'Dinner With Jan Wong,' " one of them emailed, "I think I speak for others when I say there would be a collective reluctance, if not hostility."

When I ignored him, he emailed everyone to warn them I was writing about the reunion. "Diane and I have set some ground rules," he reassured the class of '69.

Kit Kennard hit reply-all: "Jan — screw the ground rules!!"

I didn't remember Kit either.





Steve Manstavich, vice-principal of Royal West Academy (formerly Montreal West High School), tells the class of 1969 about some of the changes their school has undergone in the last 50 years. *DAVE SIDAWAY / MONTREAL GAZETTE*

MWHS's roots date to the late 19th century, when students squeezed into an Anglican church. The three-storey brick structure I attended, built in 1931, could barely contain my boomer cohort. Of our eight Grade 8 homerooms, one was in the cafeteria, and mine was in the auditorium.

I learned needlepoint, Latin and biology, and dreamed of studying medicine. The guidance counsellor nixed that.

"Not a doctor, but you can be a nurse." He added: "And when you get married, make sure your husband wears the pants." It would take a dozen more encounters like that to transform me into a feminist.

That was 1969. In February, the Front de libération du Québec bombed the Montreal Stock Exchange. The next year, it kidnapped the British trade commissioner, who survived, and a provincial minister, who died. In the aftermath, corporate Canada fled to Toronto, and the anglo managerial class followed. (I left, too — for China, in search of my roots — but that's another story.)

In 1983, declining enrolment forced MWHS to reinvent itself. Royal West Academy is now an English public school for the academically gifted. According to photos on its website, it is ethnically diverse.





Kit Kennard, Jan Wong's new best friend, was a 6-foot-10 centre on the Montreal West High School basketball team. *DAVE SIDAWAY / MONTREAL GAZETTE*

On a sunny afternoon in September, vice-principal Steve Manstavich walked us through the auditorium, the gym, the library and Room 217, the band room. I liked band so much I didn't mind when the teacher would flick his baton at me and tell this lame joke:

Why are there no phone books in China? Because they always wing the wong number.

One in five, or 49 of the 239 members of the class of '69 had shown up. I recognized almost no one.

"You look familiar," I lied, approaching a man standing alone.

"I'm a spouse."

No one minded being quoted. Christine Reed said we'd gone out on a double date. "I remember because it was my only date in high school," she said, naming the two boys.

I was flabbergasted. I was sure no one had ever invited me out. I was so desperate for a prom date that I had to raid a boy from Grade 10.

Warren Vipond assured me that at the prom after-party, he was after me, along with another guy, Martin Moss, who wasn't at the reunion. "I had the hots for you," said Vipond, "but I was too friggin' shy."

Wait — Moss *was* my prom date. Vipond insisted Moss was in our graduating class, not Grade 10.

How could I misremember so much?

Fred Donaldson, a retired lieutenant colonel in the Canadian Armed Forces, had brought a copy of our yearbook. He said I *wasn't* the only Chinese. As I paged through the yearbook, I didn't find any photos of teachers in brownface, but I did find Prom Date Moss, *two* black students and a second Chinese. And Moss was indeed in our graduating class.

Next to a photo of me performing a classic Chinese ribbon dance was the charming pedophile who taught biology at our school for 30 years. In 2006, more than two decades after he retired, Renwick Spence pleaded guilty to six counts of indecent assault and one of gross indecency involving seven boys. He was sentenced to 2 1/2 years in prison. In 2013, the English Montreal School Board settled a class action lawsuit, paying \$5 million to the victims, who remain unidentified.

Spence died in 2016. It was unclear if any victims were in our year. At least one was someone's older brother. Another was a younger brother.



Fred Donaldson brought a copy of the 1969 yearbook to the reunion, and its contents surprised Jan Wong. *DAVE SIDAWAY / MONTREAL GAZETTE*

David Carr, the late media columnist for the New York Times, explored the unreliability of memory. Do we remember only stories that make us look good in the rearview mirror? Or do we use the tools of journalism to fact-check the past?

My memories had shifted to fit my desired narrative. The yearbook showed I was everywhere — on the field hockey team, the school newspaper and the Reach for the Top squad; first flute in the band; co-head of my athletic house.

Was my sense of being marginalized merely generic teenage angst?

“You were part of the growing pains of multiculturalism,” said the Gazette photographer, snapping a shot of me in front of a sea of white faces.

Organizing a reunion is a thankless task. Some of us griped about the \$60 ticket for a lukewarm meal of mystery meat and half-raw rice in aluminum steam-table pans.

“That was my first thought. No French food? What the hell!” said Cathy Martin Buchanan, who lives in East Greenwich, R.I.

At 8 p.m., Brian Greenway, singer for April Wine, blasted us with his greatest hits. All conversation ceased. Our folding table vibrated. I put in earplugs. Janet Coppold muttered, “If they make us get up and do the Twist, I’m going home.”

My newest best friend, Kit (Screw the Ground Rules) Kennard, stood up. I noticed because he’s 6 foot 10.

“Are you leaving?” I asked hopefully.

“Shhh!” he hissed, but kindly offered me a lift to my sister’s house.

We fled giggling, like we were teenagers again, playing hooky.

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