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Glory Days from a 1965 Yearbook

From a most unlikely muse, Tarrytown artist finds inspiration, friends and a window display at Barneys.

Marcy Gray

If you were walking down 22nd Street in New York City's Chelsea district and found a pile of someone's belongings on the sidewalk with an old yearbook on top, what would you do? Would you glance idly at the discarded pile, muse momentarily on the identity of the owner and keep walking? Would you pick up the curious artifact of a yearbook, read the cover that said, "The Altruist, 1965" on it and keep walking? Or would you pick up the yearbook, flip through some of the pages, bring it home and completely change your life?

For most people the choice would be between one of the first two options. For Laurie Munn, artist, Tarrytown resident and mother of two, it was the last. Almost 30 years ago, Munn found the Class of 1965 yearbook from Emerson High School in Union, N.J. "It was like something from 'Raiders of the Lost Ark,'" she said in a recent interview at her home overlooking the Hudson River. "It was like a jewel." Munn is only half kidding in her high regard. Born in New Jersey, Munn's family moved to Geneva when she was 14; she missed out on graduating from an American high school in what would have been ... the Class of 1965.



Laurie Munn, with some of the portraits behind her, commences her annual exploration into the Class of 1965.

Munn was fascinated by the yearbook. "I loved it. Everybody looked great, and I loved the hairstyles. It became my coffee table book. I would look at it all the time." But then the rest of life took over, and a budding obsession was put on hold. She and her husband moved to a series of river towns before finally settling in Tarrytown. They raised two children and three years ago Munn, now 59, went to the School of Visual Arts for a master's degree in fine art, "the oldest graduate student they'd ever had."

While digging through boxes of old art supplies, she came across "The Altruist" and became

reacquainted with her earlier fascination. As a school project she began to paint the graduating seniors' portraits, rendering their black and white photographs into colorful works of art. When she had completed 50 out of a possible 220 one of her teachers said, "You can either stop now or go all the way to the extreme and maybe one day get a show in New York City."

But it was "never about getting a show," Munn said. It was about recreating what she had never known and what she yearned for. It was about doing portraits of chubby majorettes, crew cut football players, prom committee members. It was nostalgia for memories she had never had, come to life at the stroke of her paintbrush.

Munn decided to go one step further. As she continued her portraits, she began to make a film and went to visit Emerson High School with a video camera. In the principal's office, Munn found some of her subjects — now teachers or administrators — heavier, with far less hair and completely taken aback by this woman claiming, "I just finished painting your portrait!" Munn learned that the owner of her copy of "The Altruist," Bernard Becker, had been its photo editor, lost much of his eyesight, contracted AIDS and committed suicide in 1980, the same year she found the yearbook.

"I feel like I've continued his eyesight," she said.

Munn continued her exploration into the Class of 1965. She contacted the seniors, arranged a reunion at the Doubletree Hotel in Mahwah, N.J., at which she displayed her portraits in the hallway and became friends with many of her subjects. She had her hair done in a 60s style by the 1965 homecoming queen who is now a hairdresser, helped to rekindle a romance between two former high school sweethearts and kept on filming, a project in which HBO has expressed interest.

Although it was never about getting an exhibit, Munn wanted a place to show all her portraits in one setting. She called Barneys, one of New York's premiere shopping destinations famous for its unique window displays, and pitched the idea that they use her work for a June prom theme. " 'Honey,' " she was told, " 'we're Barneys. We don't do prom season.' " But they saw her work and succumbed. From May 16 to June 12, anyone passing by Barneys on Madison Avenue can view Munn's collective work in all its glory.

Asked if she ever felt that she had gone too far, had become too obsessed with other people's glory days of high school, Munn laughed. "Only just about every day," she said. But she wouldn't have had it any other way.

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