

Westchester

Section 14

Peggy Sue Got Married,
And Lots of Others, Too

By PETER C. BELLER

THE story of how Laurie Munn's basement came to be filled with paintings of smiling rosy-cheeked young men and women in unmistakably outdated hairstyles starts 25 years ago when she happened upon a yearbook on a Manhattan sidewalk. It ended on Nov. 19 when the owners of those faces, now in their late 50's, marveled at the images of their former selves at their 40th high school reunion.

An artist who lives in Tarrytown and the Hamptons, Ms. Munn, 58, has spent a good part of the last three years painting portraits of the entire class of 1965 of Emerson High School (in Union City, N.J.), all 220 of them, along with other yearbook scenes that any baby boomer would identify with.

As part of her project, which earned her a master's degree from the School of Visual Arts in Manhattan, Ms. Munn also tracked down Emerson High graduates to find out where life had taken them, documenting the ups and downs of a typical slice of 1960's suburbia.

"I'm totally immersed in this story and in their lives," Ms. Munn said not long ago, as she hurried to finish the last paintings before the reunion. "It is a little crazy but I do feel a compulsion. I can't stop until they're all done."

Ms. Munn was walking in the Chelsea section of Manhattan in 1980 when she picked up a yearbook called *The Altruist* resting on a pile of belongings that had been discarded on the sidewalk. Born in New Jersey and raised during her early years in California, she moved with her parents to Switzerland when she was 14. After high school there, she attended the Sorbonne and lived in London and Italy before returning to the United States.

"Because I didn't graduate from an American high school," she said, "I always felt inferior somehow because I missed out on, I don't know what, on cheerleading or something." She noted that she would have been in the class of 1965.

Living in New York, she made and sold T-shirts and psychedelic window shades, marched against the Vietnam War and eventually married and raised two children. As she became more successful, showing her work in New York and Tokyo, she still occasionally leafed through the yearbook, thinking about the high school experience she had never had and wondering about the book's owner, Bernard Becker.

"I really loved that yearbook," she said. "I

From finding a yearbook
to making portraits of
1960's faces.

got to know it."

She pulled the book out of storage in 2003 when she decided to go back to school. She was easily the oldest graduate student in her class at the School of Visual Arts, she said. Starting with scattered photos of football players, cheerleaders and marching band musicians, Ms. Munn projected the scenes onto canvas and drew in charcoal or painted pastel hues with acrylic. After she had painted 40 portraits, guessing at eye color and imagining personalities from the short profiles beneath each photo, her teacher, suspecting she was devoted to doing them all, told her to add another element to her thesis work.



Janet Durrans for The New York Times

Laurie Munn, in the basement of her Tarrytown home, displays portraits from the class of 1965 of Emerson High.

In the book, under preferred occupations, many girls chose secretary, nurse or teacher, signs of another era. Business and the Air-Force were popular with the boys, along with a healthy smattering of "college" among both sexes.

"As you get into them, you start really loving these people," Ms. Munn said. "I feel like I know them."

Some stories ended more happily than others. Rosemary Hicks was married two weeks after graduation and dead two weeks later, Ms. Munn learned. The

So Ms. Munn visited the school, on a hill overlooking New York City; the largely Italian-American community that produced the class of 1965 was now a run-down neighborhood of mostly Latinos. She arrived in the middle of a drug raid, and while waiting for the principal in his office, she struck up a conversation with Richard Ardito, a teacher, who recognized the yearbook.

It turned out that Mr. Ardito, a bit chubbier now but with the same easily recognizable smile, was the subject of one of Ms. Munn's favorite portraits. A few minutes later he ushered another Emerson teacher, Ronald Si-rianni, also class of 1965, into the office, and soon Ms. Munn was meeting other alumni and telling them about her project.

She found Joseph DeSantis, a star athlete, working at Rudy's bar in Cliffside Park and eager to reminisce. Frannie Galdini, the homecoming queen, is a hairstylist not too

far from the school. Slowly, word spread about the portraits, and Ms. Munn produced a 15-minute video from her interviews, set to "Wooly Bully" by Sam the Sham and the Pharaohs and other songs of the era. "Some people are very nice about it," Ms. Munn said, "and some people are very suspicious."

Frank Maniscalco was one of the latter. On the video, when Ms. Munn approaches him at a reunion for another Emerson class that some 1965 graduates attended, he says, "I think I'll take a pass." After a few minutes of convincing by Mr. DeSantis, Mr. Maniscalco comes around. During a tour of Ms. Munn's studio a few days before the reunion, she showed off her nearly completed works, pointing out faces and names that she has learned by heart. "This one is a hairdresser in Miami," she said, pointing around the room. "This one told me he's living on borrowed time."

owner of the yearbook, Bernard Becker, wearing a serious expression in his portrait, went blind and eventually took his own life, possibly an early victim of AIDS.

At the reunion, which was held at the Doubletree Inn in Mahwah, N.J., 36 portraits were set apart to indicate members of the class who had died.

Ms. Munn's new friendships with some of the alumni had helped prod them into organizing the event, 15 years after their last one. Nearly half the class showed up, elegantly dressed, enthusiastically greeting one another. Ms. Munn's works lined the hall, and husbands and wives photographed each other in front of their younger selves, looked solemnly at the portraits of their departed classmates and reminisced over scenes of prom night and majorettes. "She's now part of the class," said Jeanie Matthies, one of the reunion's organizers, of Ms. Munn, "whether she wants to be or not."