

# South Hills High alums aid others' college climb

Maybe there are other schools that sounded their last bell more than a quarter-century ago but still have alumni passing out \$1,000 college scholarships to shirt-tail relatives and descendants of the school's graduates.

But there can't be many like South Hills High. It shut down in 1986, but this year the alumni association fielded 37 applications from across the country for 15 scholarships. The only real requirement is that the applicant must be a graduate in that calendar year from high school and headed to a college or trade school, or have just served a single tour in the armed forces and headed for school — and be related to a current member of the alumni association.

"They could be the second cousin twice removed," Leo Goode, a 1966 graduate, said. "It doesn't matter how distant. We've had applications from all parts of the country."

I frankly didn't get it. What was it about this defunct school on the southern side of Mount Washington that keeps its graduates plunking down thousands of dollars each year for kids that probably couldn't find the school if you stuck them on Grandview Avenue and handed them cab fare.



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"I may be too dumb to give up," Russ Pontow, the alumni president and a '63 graduate, joked when I asked him.

He actually has a more elaborate theory.

Kitty Oliver McRoberts, class of '35, launched the alumni association in 1961. It has given out about a quarter-million dollars in scholarships since — with no more advertising than the alumni newsletter. The association is strong, Mr. Pontow believes, because for most of those who graduated before the height of the Vietnam War, high school was the last educational stop.

No friendships were made in college to dilute the "American Graffiti" kind of high school bonds that Pontow and his classmates had going back then.

"The school became our parent," he recalled. "We communicated as if we were all siblings — black, white, yellow, green, we were all the same."

Maybe — though speaking only for myself, I'd be dubious of any green students — that's true. But this group claims to be the oldest and largest high school alumni association in Western Pennsylvania, and it couldn't sustain this kind of success if it relied entirely on the pre-1965 crowd.

A recent newsletter bore that evidence. Megan Humphreys, a 2005 graduate of the University of Arizona with a degree in civil engineering and Spanish, said the \$1,000 scholarship she received in 2000 was critical in helping with her expenses. She works for ExxonMobil in Houston now, and with finances not as tight, she matched the scholarship she received with her own donation to be directed toward a female engineering student.

At some point I need to mention walking the hills. I don't know if there's any connection between strong leg muscles and uncommon generosity, but almost every South Hills grad got around to talking about the slopes they conquered to get to school each day. (This is the quintessential school for those "I walked uphill both ways" stories that parents tell their children.)

Phyllis Haduch, who grew up on Sycamore Street, also known as the "Burma Road" that comes up Mount Washington from another direction, said there weren't any fat girls on her street because the calories never had time to take hold.

Mrs. Haduch, 85, still knows the school as well as she knows her own home. She moved into it 2½ years ago when it opened as a retirement residence, and it didn't surprise me when she told me she recently won nine medals in the city's Senior Games. Clearly, those hills are still great training.

The scholarship deadline for this year was April Fool's Day, and I'm not fooling, but if you are a kid or know a kid who is graduating high school in 2014, this would be a good time to start tracking down long-lost relatives who went to South Hills High.

This being Pittsburgh, where most folks are just three or four degrees of separation from being someone's cousin, that shouldn't be hard. Any older relative with powerful thighs would be a good one to ask first.

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