

Alum still feel strong pull to defunct Lowell Magnet School

'MicroSociety' concept taught life lessons

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LOWELL -- The preamble to their constitution, ratified in 1982, began ... "We The Citizens of the City Magnet School, in order to form a more perfect micro-society, to establish fairness and ensure school peace ..."

The guaranteed freedom was cherished by Sally Chhonn, 24, who today works for Standish Mellon Asset Management Co. in Boston. "One period each day, you did not have to stand in a single-file line and listen to what the teachers had to say," she said. "You got out of your chair and were in charge of your business."

In 1981, Lowell's C.G. McDonough City Magnet School became the first school in America with a schoolwide MicroSociety program. A cutting-edge concept enabling students to create and manage their own little real world, the Magnet School's MicroSociety in kindergarten through grade eight drew worldwide attention and lasted until 2005 -- when the City Magnet and Demonstration Schools were merged into the Bartlett Community Partnership School.

On Tuesday night, about 70 former students and teachers from the City Magnet School MicroSociety gathered for a hug-filled reunion at Cobblestones restaurant.

They fondly recalled a MicroSociety with its own economy, legislature and court. Students had jobs to earn "Mogans" (the money was named for Patrick Mogan, Lowell's superintendent of schools when the MicroSociety was launched). They purchased products made by students. They paid taxes. If they did not pay their taxes, they were hauled into court and had to pay for a lawyer.



"Many students later said they otherwise wouldn't have had a clue about the intricacies of the real world," said Tom Malone, a former principal of the City Magnet School.

About 250 schools in the country now have MicroSociety programs. "Sadly, right now, there are none in Massachusetts," said Rob Kutzik, senior vice president of MicroSociety Inc., a non-profit educational services organization based in Philadelphia.

Former student Weeldens Louis, left, is greeted by her former teacher Rachel Kharfen, at a reunion of former C.G. McDonough City Magnet School students and faculty on Tuesday. Sun/Tory Germann

As a member of Lowell's MicroSociety in grades five to eight from 1995-98, Chhonn worked as a tax collector, science-museum employee, newspaper editor, bank teller and legislator. Today, as an assets manager, the Northeastern University graduate still calls upon skills she developed while serving on the MicroSociety's social action committee.

One year, Chhonn helped organize a "Save the Rain Forest" project. The committee turned a classroom into a rain forest, tossing dirt on the floor and attaching leaves to the walls. "The custodians weren't too happy about that," Chhonn said, smiling.

A keeper of exotic animals was hired to visit the room. Tickets were sold to kindergarten students and first-graders. "With the extra money, we bought an acre of the rain forest," said Chhonn, born the year her parents arrived here from Cambodia.

Dominic DeJesus was a lawyer in the MicroSociety, representing students in disputes with other students and also with the tax collector. Now a 16-year-old junior at Phillips Andover, DeJesus said becoming a lawyer "is one of the things I'm considering."

"I don't think I would be considering it if it hadn't been for City Magnet," DeJesus said. "I wouldn't know anything about it."

The City Magnet School's MicroSociety began in 1981 in the basement of the Lowell High School library with about 100 kids. A scrapbook at Tuesday's reunion included a 1984 editorial in The Sun opposing moving the City Magnet School into the old trade school building on French Street. There were far better commercial uses for that building, The Sun insisted.

Six years later, when renowned broadcast journalist Roger Mudd came to Lowell to do a story on the City Magnet School as part of a series titled "Learning in America: Schools That Work," The Sun praised the MicroSociety housed in that renovated old trade school building as a "national showpiece."

"If you go back and look, we had Japanese film crews come, and Walter Cronkite and Peter Jennings do reports on us," said Dave Cronin, one of the teachers who helped start up the MicroSociety program in Lowell. "Educators from across the country would visit to get ideas."

Sergio Perez, now a 31-year-old staff accountant for Action for Boston Community Development, Inc., was in the eighth-grade class of 1991 that had Lee Iacocca as its commencement speaker. Like the former president and CEO of Chrysler, Perez was a businessman, selling pins and spinning tops to his fellow students in the MicroSociety. Balance sheets, income statements and general ledgers were kept.

"I was always pretty good at that, so that's what I do now," said Perez, who attended Lowell High and UMass Amherst.