

Fewer students turn pages of yearbooks in digital age

February 27 2009, By Kim Hone-Mcmahan

Kristen Thompson grinned when chatting about how her parents sometimes reminisce about their school days, flipping through the pages of the yearbook.

For those of us who bought the annuals, the headshot of the class clown can thrust us back to the time when he and some of his mischievous pals lifted the principal's Volkswagen Beetle and carried it into the school's gymnasium. Or maybe the photo of the pimple-faced kid makes you quiver, recalling the boogers he stuck beneath the desk in biology class. And how about that heartthrob with the sky-blue eyes and dimpled chin? The one who used to tell all of the girls that he worked for Ohio Bell, and it was his job to gather their numbers for the telephone book?

Whether good or gross, the yearbook is filled with memories of the times that shaped many of our lives. But in some parts of the country, it has been done away with, or is at risk of demise.

"It's the only thing from high school that you'll probably have 20 years from now," said Thompson, a staff member of the Tallmadge High School yearbook who wasn't pleased to learn that in some schools, including at least one in the Houston area, the annual is no more.

Some say it's the economy, others say it's because of the popularity of social networks like Facebook. And then there are the teens who simply don't have a loyalty to their school - usually no fault of their own.

About 275 students at Akron, Ohio's Garfield High School are expected to get this year's annuals. The cost of the book is included in senior dues. Yearbook adviser Jeffrey Davis said he expects about 245 Garfield pupils to pay those dues, meaning just 30 underclassmen will have ordered the books.

In addition to students not having an extra \$55 to pay for the books, he believes the issue of transience has an impact on sales. As of the first of February, five months after school began, the teacher had already experienced a 20 percent turnover in his student roster.

"A couple of my kids are in their third school this year," he explained. "That makes it very tough for many inner-city students to develop an allegiance to their high school. Why would a student buy a Garfield yearbook if there's a chance he will be at East by the end of the year?"

Davis noted that most of the turnover is the result of parent or guardian relocations, but there are other factors such as open enrollment, which allows students to transfer to other schools in the district.

There are, of course, some exceptions, but depending on the school, sales are generally down as little as 5 percent in some areas to as much as 50 percent in others.

There was a significant drop in sales during the 1980s, when enrollment at some schools declined. A concentrated effort was put in place to market the books differently. Companies that produced them took over, helping with promotions and sales. By the late '90s, their efforts were paying off.

Today, as Davis mentioned, the lack of cash is one factor that's keeping sales down at some schools.

"I'm not getting a yearbook because they are just too darn expensive," explained Sammy Parks, a 15-year-old who attends Revere High School.

It's a sentiment that was repeated by others, particularly underclassmen. But for many seniors in our area, particularly those in suburban districts where switching schools is less frequent, having a flashback to their teenage years neatly bound together in a handsome package remains important.

"I want to be able to remember my classmates in the future," explained Green senior Todd Starkey. "The yearbook crew always makes them great."

That's what Eric Poston, student editor of the yearbook staff at Green, likes to hear. About half of the high school student body has bought yearbooks, a number that has stayed consistent the past few years.

"I am grateful that students think so highly of the yearbook staff," a proud Poston said. "The entire staff puts a lot of hard work in the book each day."

SOCIAL NETWORKING

If hawking the memory tomes isn't difficult enough during a struggling economy, the popularity of social-networking sites like Facebook can complicate the matter.

The computer site allows anyone to post photos and create albums. It's free and accessible with just a click of a button. But those types of sites might be gone, or at the very least remarkably different, when today's high school seniors are grandparents.

"When I'm 50 years old, I'm not going to have a Facebook," explained

Natalie Walker, Tallmadge High School senior and member of the yearbook staff.

"And those sites aren't capturing enough of what's happening inside the schools," added classmate Mercedes Slider.

A list is posted on the wall inside Julie Headrick's classroom at Tallmadge High where her yearbook staff keeps track of the school's students in an attempt to get everyone's photo in the book at least once. It's a good marketing strategy.

To get kids to buy the yearbooks, said Jim Barbour of Herff Jones, which produces yearbooks in our area, printers must help schools develop more viable marketing approaches.

Kids are relying less on e-mails and more on text messages to get information, so a teen might receive a text from a pal on the yearbook staff reminding him that it's time to order.

It takes much more these days to hawk the book than a couple of kids sitting in the cafeteria at lunch. Those who are true to their school need to hear why the annuals are something they will want someday.

"I wouldn't say the yearbook is dying, but I think we need to tell people why it's alive," Barbour said.

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