

OCEANSIDE HIGH SCHOOL, CLASS OF 1960
50-YEAR GRAND REUNION GALA – WELCOMING ADDRESS – JUNE 26, 2010
by Howard B. Levy



Good evening, dear friends and classmates, and welcome to your **50-Year Grand Reunion Gala** – our **really senior senior prom!!** (That's why I'm dressed the way I am.) **And what a momentous occasion this is!** Welcome to our other guests, too. Of the six post-graduation class gatherings beginning in 1970, this is the fifth consecutive one that I've had the privilege and extreme pleasure of addressing this great class.

As you would expect, all of my reunion addresses have featured a heavily nostalgic theme evoking memories of the time we all shared as teenagers growing up in our little town of Oceanside, Long Island, New York – the time that has since come to be known as the fabulous fifties. **And what a time that was!**

You may recall that each of my successive reunion speeches re-echoed some of my favorite words on that overall nostalgic theme, and to some extent I will do that again tonight. It is really hard to come up with a new twist every time, and I have always started out doubtful that I would get the inspiration to do it. Nevertheless, within that general look backward theme, each reunion speech that I delivered has had a distinct special focus of its own. For example, in 2000, I focused on how our high school and growing up experiences in the 1950s differed from those of our children and grandchildren. In 1990, at the suggestion of my very dear friend, our one and only Doreen, I spoke of the year, 1960, as a turning point in both our own lives as well as in American social history. (Paraphrasing slightly some famous words written by Bob Dylan, the times, they were "*a-changin'*.")

Often using familiar lyrics to express my thoughts, and with slideshow images to bring you back in time, I spoke at each of the last four reunions of our very own rock 'n' roll music, of dancing, partying and of coming of age together. I spoke of hot dogs and cool cars, of "*tailfins, teen idols and TV quiz shows, of hula hoops and poodle skirts, of saddle shoes and sack dresses, sock hops, malt shops, flattops and Chuck Berry songs.*" And I spoke of heroes and baseball, of simple values and simple times, and of our little town, with its two – yes, two –

world-renowned religious shrines, each of which attracted huge pilgrimages to it for decades. I mean, of course, St. Anthony's underground chapel – and the Roadside Rest that, in 1959, became Nathan's Famous. But mostly, I spoke of our sharing incredible amounts of fun in a very short time together. And did I mention that I spoke of our own, very special, rock 'n' roll music, music that I describe on our class website as "*truly the treasure of our time and the jewel of our generation*"?

But this time, I will get a bit deeper, a bit more serious and – if you can imagine it – a bit more sentimental than before. This time, I won't speak any more about Oceanside or high school, rock 'n' roll or the 1950s. This time, I will speak mainly about a subject I only mentioned in passing in past reunion speeches. This time, it's all about friendship, specifically about the value of old friends – a subject about which I believe I can speak as an "expert," thanks especially to several members of this great class.

Over the last 50 years, I have observed that as most people approach and pass middle age, they harbor the strongest nostalgic feelings for either their high school or college days, but rarely for both. However, like me and many of our contemporaries, I sense that most of **us**, in particular, favor the high school times. And I ask myself, why is that? Was it the great place where we grew up and went to high school? Maybe to some extent. Was it the times in which we grew up? Probably a great deal more so. But I truly believe the most important reason for our nostalgia was the people with whom we grew up – and the quality and durability of the friendships we formed in those days – as I first said twenty years ago, "*the most intimate, precious and lasting friendships of our lives.*"

The very popular Muhammad Ali was not, of course, widely known particularly for his wisdom; nevertheless, he proclaimed quite wisely, that "[*f*]riendship is the hardest thing in the world to explain. It's not something you learn in school." But high school is where I learned about it. How about you? I have often said that my clearest and fondest memory of my time in high school is not a single specific event, a series of events or a person. It is a feeling – one that has never quite been duplicated in my 50 years of life since OHS – that is, the general feeling of being almost always surrounded by so many wonderful friends – great guys and gals who filled each day with the pleasure of being around them. Many of these people, as I also said in 1990, are "*still among my closest friends – very special people who, after all these years, are dearer to me than ever – people I still see often, but never often enough.*" Many are now in this room making this Grand Reunion event so very special.

Over the last half century, I have also learned that, like all relationships, long-term friendships do not maintain themselves – one must work at them. Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote, "*The only way to have a friend is to be one.*" And according to an old Biblical proverb, a true friend sticks closer than a brother. But long-term friendships are often more difficult to maintain today than marriages and other close family relationships are, and they are more difficult than they were for our parents' generation because our increased societal mobility more often separates old friends by great distances and considerable periods of time.

In the early years after high school, because of the daily pressures of building one's family and career, even before I left the New York area, I found myself more and more out of touch with the friends I valued the most. But following our 20-year reunion in 1980, I vowed not to allow that condition to prevail again despite the geographical distance that by then separated me from all of them. Eventually, with the internet, e-mail and free long-distance, it became infinitely easier to maintain frequent contact with old friends, to share each other's celebrations and other joys, as well as losses and other tragedies. Together with my involvement over the last eleven years with the class website and our reunions, I have not only been drawn closer to my dearest old friends among us, but I have established new close friendships among those classmates whom I barely knew in high school. I must tell you that this newly escalated interaction with my OHS classmates has enormously enriched this phase of my life. Many of you know, there is nothing more heartwarming to me than sharing common memories, experiences and other friendships with contemporaries who retain a deep love for the joys of the past, for their common history, and for each other. As I said ten years ago, *"the older we get, the easier it becomes — just by spending a little time together sharing such sentiments — to turn old acquaintances into dear old friends and dear old friends into treasures."*

And what precious treasures our old friendships are. Haven't you heard the expression, *"There are no friends like old friends,"* or as it has been put a less familiar way, *"One old friend is better than two new ones"*? As I have been pointing out, many famous people have spoken of friendship. Abraham Lincoln said, *"The better part of one's life consists of his friendships."* Aristotle said, *"Without friends, no one would choose to live."* And Socrates said, *"There is no possession more valuable than a good and faithful friend."*

According to Henry David Thoreau, *"The only danger in friendship is that it will end."* Therefore, our old friendships must be cherished and nurtured for we know they are not forever. In 2005, actor, Jack Klugman, echoed this sentiment in a book he wrote about his dearest friend, Tony Randall, who had just passed on. It was called *Tony and Me: a Story of Friendship*. He said, *"friendship is something that people undervalue. ...if you have a friend, don't take it for granted, appreciate it, know what it is, talk about it, tell them how important it is to you."*

Never do we face our own mortality more suddenly and strikingly than upon the sad loss of a close friend our own age. I experienced that most recently just last month when we lost Donny Fine, who was looking forward to this **Grand Reunion**. Before that, it was Michael Katz in 2008, and for the first time in 1999 when we lost Joel Pravda/ I'm sure you remember all three. They were all my close friends since 1954 when we first became a class. Although such losses were painful, indeed, I was grateful to have maintained close contact with these dear friends before their untimely passings. Had I not, I'm certain the pain of their passings would have been even greater.

So don't wait to hear from that old friend who is so dear to you. Reach out every now and then — by e-mail or phone — and tell your friend that you are thinking about him or her and about what is going on in your life. Ask your friend about what's going on in his or hers. Or better yet, while you still can, get in a car or on a train or a plane, and go hug your friend, and enjoy some laughter together. He or she will be moved to share your sentiment, and you will both feel great about it.

50 years ago last month, we all danced together — without a care in the world — in our white dinner jackets and prom formals. And remarkably, 50 years ago this very day, we stood together on the athletic field behind OHS, draped in our blue and white gowns, and we flung our mortarboards skyward, many of us with a tear or two in our eyes, as we said goodbye forever to our adolescence, to our beloved high school, and to the fabulous decade we grew up in. But as we look around us tonight, we can see that we are still together after 50 years, still dancing together, hugging each other and sharing our common memories and bonds of friendship that now are stronger than ever. And now we can ponder that were it not for our series of wonderful reunions every now and then (and for the internet, I might add), we might have also said goodbye forever that day exactly 50 years ago to many of the dear friends we grew up with and many of the fond memories we are sharing with them tonight.

A favorite birthday greeting that I have often sent in an e-card to many of my dearest friends among you — to help me stay in touch — sums up all these thoughts quite well in very few words. It says, *"Life's finest moments are those we spend in the company of friends."* So I invite all of you to continue to enjoy our coming together once again tonight, after up to 50 years apart, to share some hugs, some joy and laughter, and maybe some tears, and to relish in some of life's very finest moments in the company of friends — dear old friends — lifelong friends.

Before I close, I would like to read you some simple but beautiful words of unknown origin that someone sent me serendipitously as I was preparing this speech not so long ago, someone who is in this room with us now, my dear old friend and yours, Nancy Keegan Bixby:

*"A friend is someone we turn to when our spirits need a lift.
A friend is someone we treasure for our friendship is a gift.
A friend is someone who fills our lives with beauty, joy, and grace.
And makes the world we live in a better and happier place."*

So, my friends, once again together after 50 years, let us now rejoice and rejuvenate, reminisce and reuniate, let us rise together and **rock 'n' roll!**