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Number 47 was a smash

By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—I've never been to a better party.

Last Friday and Saturday nights, my high-school class celebrated 1959-1963, the years we spent at Pittsburgh's Peabody High School.

Born in 1945, we turned 65 in 2010 and graduated 47 years ago. We're happy to still be here, and a little sad that we are this old.

It's a milestone birthday. One present you receive is enrollment in Medicare's Rubik's Cube of copays, deductibles, premiums, parts, plans, gaps and donut holes. It is wrapped in four billion pounds of promotional mail warning that if you don't buy additional health insurance, you will become a pauper and die dreadfully.

High school is a long way back in time, but only a second away in memory. Every one of us carries the voices of our teachers, the smell of freshly baked cafeteria rolls and the Darwinian anatomy lessons observed in the locker room. And we don't need a digital device to call up any of it. Hands-free access. Imagine!

It was a lot harder to graduate from Peabody High School than to get a Ph.D. from Columbia University. Passing a doctoral committee was a snap compared to slipping past 10 giant seniors with ducktail haircuts on the second-floor landing who were talking about "barreling" a first-day freshman—stuffing me into a trash container and rolling me down a 30-foot staircase.

The Friday night reception was held in a hotel that wasn't built when we graduated. The Saturday night gala was held at a country club that almost none of our parents could have afforded in 1963, and only about half of them would have even been considered for membership.

Though we are now adult men and women, taxpayers and grandparents, these adolescent years stick like a shadow.

The teenagers we were, and how we recall ourselves and each other, swelled our numbers. Every two-person conversation always involved eight, only two of whom were visible participants.

We have changed over 47 years. Most of the boys have lost a hair or two on top and gained no more than an inch or two around the middle. The girls, of

course, have only improved. (I'm running for Most Honest in our next class election.)

Foxy at 65 isn't what foxy at 17 was, but it's not tapioca and Metamucil either. Not yet.

Some classmates are working out. It showed.

I heard a lot of talk about knees, shoulders, hips, cancers and hearts this time.

Three guys standing in a corner used to like the same girl. Now we have the same hernia.

We're nicked up, but we're still on the field even if the game is moving to a newer stadium.

I think we liked each other -- or, at least, liked being with each other -- more at this reunion than ever before. We hugged, we kissed, we patted. We put our arms around each other. Guys wanted to touch each other, to reconnect, to make sure we were really here. I got more girl time in four hours than I'd gotten in four years.

When the first seven notes of Bob Seger's "Old Time Rock and Roll" peeped out of the speakers, 30 geezers rushed the floor in a stampede. It's our music. If it doesn't make us free, it comes as close as we get. Everyone danced, even the big clunkers like me who did it in our heads. The girls got down in their white socks. Everyone knew every word and every riff to every one of those stupid, wonderful songs.

The highlight for me was an impromptu circle where the good dancers took turns in the center busting their best moves. The Commonwealth Attorney from Virginia who came with me was dragged in, though not all that reluctantly. There among the Yankees, she found her groove and shook every one of her tail feathers.

This caused your otherwise objective and dispassionate reporter to mount a chair and cheer Southern womanhood with Rebel Yells and battle cries stolen from Geronimo.

You couldn't help but like being right there, right then.

We caught up with those who came, those who didn't and those who never would again. Two classmates -- both deceased -- are alleged to have had more than a passing lifetime familiarity with an organization that promotes family values of a certain type. One strayed a bit from the expectations of his colleagues and checked out with only eight fingers; two digits, reportedly,

were the standard make-good price for his unauthorized withdrawals from the family collection box.

Those who stayed in Pittsburgh run into each other, and some have had business dealings. Not all of us are models of business ethics all the time, but one rule is followed: You don't screw a guy you knew at Peabody.

Good will was catchy. We welcomed spouses—firsts, seconds, thirds, fourths. The same went for partners, sidekicks and semi-significant others. If a '63 brought you, that was good enough. It didn't feel like there was an in-crowd. It felt like there was one crowd.

I heard no catty comments, even on the way home.

Being together brought out the best in us.

Peabody is being closed after 100 years. It had been remodeled to look like a prison—guards, metal detectors and cameras in every classroom. Maybe that's the only way today; maybe not. It doesn't matter. We have it locked in as it was, as we were.

I heard one confession and made amends for one dumb remark.

The thing I kept thinking was how much time we had back then and never knew it, and how little time we have now and know every second.

I saw no tears. I heard only laughter in the night.

As a classmate with a keen sense of life's verbal absurdities puts it, "Thanks for having me."

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