

Returning to Their Cougar Roots

By the San Diego Union-Tribune's Adrian Vore on May 8, 2015

Escondido High School alum Jacquelin Balogh wants to set the record straight. As the committee chair of this year's "50+" reunion, she has been digging up facts that have gotten lost or muddled over the years.

For example, she has reinstated the name "Golden Reunion," which, she discovered, was the original name for the gathering of people who graduated from Escondido High School (EHS) five decades or more ago. She also realized that, when last year's organizers called it the 48th reunion, they were underestimating.

"People said different dates, so I spent hours of research and figured it out. I found 1956 newspaper articles saying the reunions started in the mid-1940s," said Balogh, who graduated in 1963. "The research was like a treasure hunt."

The 70th annual Golden Reunion, a catered picnic, will be held at Grape Day Park in Escondido from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. Saturday. Balogh is working tirelessly, along with her committee of about 20 alumni.

"It's a well-oiled machine," she said. "In 1963, we were the 'baby' class. You're honored, but you have to help with the organization of the event and help the next year. Then the third year, the class organizes the event. Our trainees are the classes of 1964 and 1965. They work, too. There's a lot to do."

Indeed. In 2014, about 765 people attended the reunion and Balogh said preregistration is already a little ahead of last year. Georgia Hillebrecht Prior, class of 1943, is planning to be there. She worked on the reunion in the past and has attended every year since 1948.

"We first started in a church, then we met in a restaurant, a school, and an art center," Prior, 89, recalled. "Each year it got bigger as people heard about it and as more people came up to 50+. Then someone said: 'Let's go to Grape Day Park,' and we've been there ever since."

With such a long history, it's inevitable the event has traditions. The EHS colors of orange and black and its Cougar mascot are on display. The class entering the Golden Reunion usually creates a memory board. The board chronicles their school experiences through yearbook photos and newspaper clippings. Each year, organizers take on a special task. The 2015 committee's project is restoring the memory boards, which are 3 feet by 4 feet. Balogh said that because the boards had been stuffed into a container, they were in bad condition.

"We worked to restore every board, carefully and lovingly," said Balogh, who noted that the first one was from 1929. "The guys built orange and black racks to display the boards and storage boxes to keep them for the future. We are dedicated to the preservation of this event. It is so amazing that it has sustained itself for 70 years. We have true history to pass on."

Part of that history is the people who attend, like Prior and James Bates, patriarch of the Bates Nut Farm in Valley Center. Bates, from the class of 1939, recalled taking the 30-minute bus ride to and from school. He couldn't participate in sports because he had to get back to the farm to milk cows.

When asked why he has gone to 76 golden reunions, Bates first made a joke. "Women," the 95-year-old said. "What else is there? It's really to see the few who are left," he admitted. "There were four or five last year. I'm there to talk to people. It's real nice. I like it. It's the only way to keep in touch."

For lunch, the attendees choose between barbecued chicken, ham or beef. About 60 EHS students help set up and serve the meal. Both Prior and Balogh called the participating students "absolutely wonderful."

Prior is particularly excited this year to view the newly restored memory boards. She described the reunion this way: "We eat and we visit with people at our own table," Prior said. "And then we visit with people at tables from the previous year and those after us. It's fun because people change so much after high school."

Balogh and her team are especially attentive to Prior's and Bates' generation. "Because I'm so excited about the event's history, I'll be introducing Cougars from the older classes. They should be honored," Balogh said. "We have a good amount of attendees who are in their 80s and 90s. We'll make sure they're comfortable and close up so they can hear everything. It means so much to them. People come with their walkers or canes; they are not going to miss this!"

To learn more and download a registration form, visit ehsclassof63.com