

Name:

Chris Lese

Year graduated from MUHS:

1992

Primary interests in school and extracurricular activities:

Theater, Conclave, Yearbook

Current occupation (or former occupation if retired):

History teacher at MUHS

Where did you live while attending MUHS?

Greenfield

What were your impressions of the neighborhood during the time you attended MUHS? How did your classmates respond to the neighborhood?

The urban neighborhood was a shock coming from the suburbs. A couple of things further shaped my impressions of Merrill Park. As a member of the freshman football team, we were cautious walking to Merrill Field in the park to practice but didn't think much of it. Sometimes one of the football coaches would even send players (in uniform) to the Speed Way gas station on 35th Street to buy him cigarettes during practice. So I suppose there was an ignorance is bliss type feeling early on. That changed later during either freshman or sophomore year there was a person shot on Michigan Avenue and we walked around the chalk line that next morning. That seemed to confirm any fears or suspicions I had as a 14/15 year old about the safety of our school in the neighborhood.

But then I found out that one of the stars on our nationally ranked basketball team was a Hispanic point guard who grew up in Merrill Park. I remember being amazed that African Americans and Latino people could live together and I began to ask questions about the neighborhood and learned of its diversity. Very eye opening to me. The player's name was John Martinez. He was an excellent and went on to play a successful career at UWGB. I do not think there were many St. Rose students to follow.

Later during my junior year, there was a class called Social Lab and we volunteered at St. Rose Elementary School on a monthly basis. There my awareness grew to the history of the neighborhood seeing graduation pictures of all white students from the 30s and 40s hang from the school walls. I couldn't understand how a neighborhood could change its complexion like that. I also saw in the students we worked with the challenges the neighborhood faced.

What businesses, entertainment venues, parks, or recreational opportunities were in the neighborhood when you attended school? Were there particular "hangouts" for students near school?

There was the "Grit" club who hung out right off school property on Michigan Avenue near the new quick drop-off drive is located. Any kids who smoked were allowed to hang out there before

and after school and the numbers could range from 4-15 at any time. There was even a Jesuit who would smoke with the Grit clubbers.

As for hangouts, there were not any I was aware of. During cross country practice we would often explore Pigsville and sneak through Miller Co. to the Menomonie River and venture down through the valley. We were too concerned about safety to run through the residential neighborhoods.

Did you feel connected with the community surrounding the school? Did MUHS encourage you to be involved in any way with the community, either formally (Key Club, the Shared Life program), or informally?

My experience above in Social Lab was one way the school plugged into the neighborhood at St. Rose. I do believe that there was a tight connection between the school and neighborhood with John Martinez and the success of that basketball team. I may be off here but I remember many local residents cheering on MUHS at games, which does not occur any more. That may be one of the high points - it would be interesting to research his connection.

Did students have a sense of the attitudes of neighborhood residents toward the school?

I never spoke to residents but I recall something closer to a symbiotic relationship compared to now where it is almost nonexistent other than on administrative levels.

How did MUHS's location on the west side affect your high school experience? Did it matter that you went to school at 35<sup>th</sup> and Wisconsin instead of, say, in a suburb?

The location really shaped my experience in many ways. Back then, the school was physically in rough shape. It had very antiquated classrooms, no A/C, rocky practice fields, aging locker rooms, you name it. In many ways it matched the neighborhood and fit. There was an awareness to see beyond the surface and take pride in the school's people and accomplishments rather than care about the beauty seen at some suburban schools.

It also allowed me to become much more aware of urban living and those issues than I would have been in another school near my home.