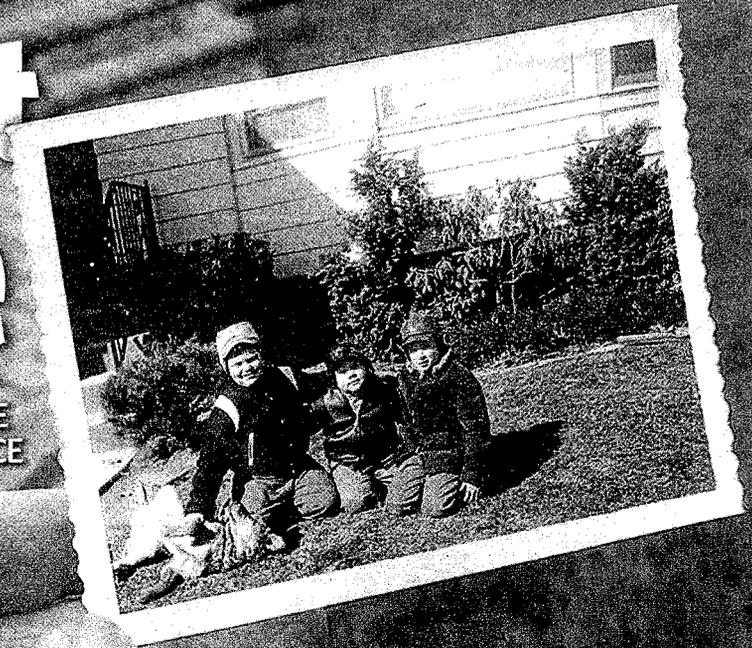


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## To Roosevelt with love

CHILDHOOD FRIENDS  
REUNITE AND HELP THE  
COMMUNITY THEY ONCE  
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G4



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# Going back home again

A group of friends who shared childhood — then the racial turmoil of the '60s — returns to Roosevelt and commits to giving back

BY CLAUDIA GRYPVATZ COPQUIN  
Special to Newsday

**D**o you remember where you were when you learned how to say “supercalifragilisticexpialidocious”? How about holding the hand of the girl your fourth-grade friends had a crush on?

Jerry Dikowitz, Milton Little, Carol Coffin Kneen and their childhood pals do. It was their hometown on the South Shore, a place where they played safely in the streets, walked to and from school each day and fostered close-knit, enduring friendships. It was a place they left but that never left them.

“It was, to me, a moment in

time that was utopian,” said Dikowitz, 58.

As much as the town was perfect for children, it appealed as much to the parents who brought them there.

Linda Karger and her husband moved their family to a house on Hausch Boulevard. The community was pleasant, middle-class and affordable, she said.

“We had our children in Borough Park, Brooklyn, and were searching for a home,” she said. “We lived in an apartment that was small. Then we found this nice little town. It was very appealing.”

The place they all remember so fondly is Roosevelt, where neighbors were black, white, Jewish, Italian, Christian and Protestant. It was the early 1960s and Roosevelt, at its core a racially mixed, middle-class community with neat little houses and tree-lined streets,



Jerry Dikowitz of Plainview visits the Meyer Street home in Roosevelt where he lived until age 13. Above: Dikowitz, mom Selma and the family pooch on the front lawn in 1964.



## Pals recall the town of their youth

COVER STORY from G4

of Dikowitz's best friends. "Every morning for kindergarten, my mom would give me carrot sticks in aluminum foil. And I would walk to Carol Coffin's house. Her mom would make me an English muffin, and me and Carol would walk the half-mile to school. I was literally 4, 4½ years old."

When everyone arrived at school, "we'd stay outside and talk until they opened the doors and let us come in," said Dikowitz, who now lives in Plainview.

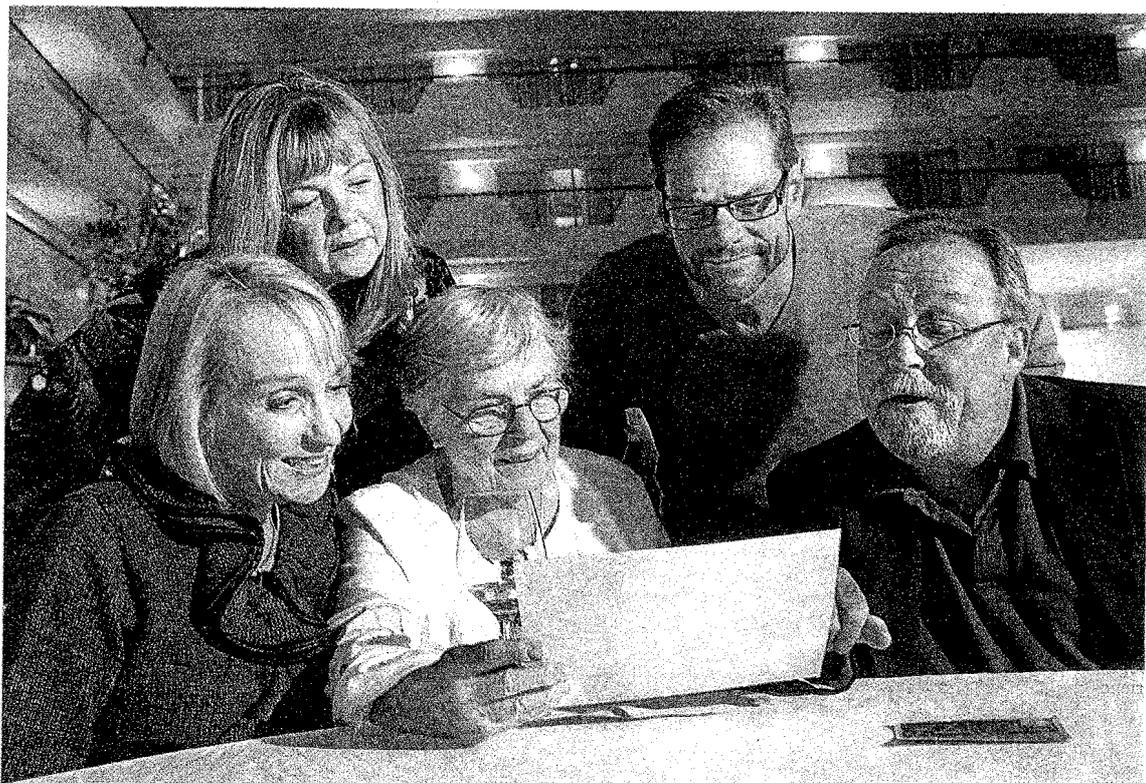
Once inside, "We were always challenged according to our level of ability, and our teachers had extremely high expectations of us," said Coffin Kneen, who lives in Iowa. "When I look back at my education, I think it was far superior than most schools now. It really prepared me for life. We learned about art, drama, theater, music, current events . . ."

### Life at school

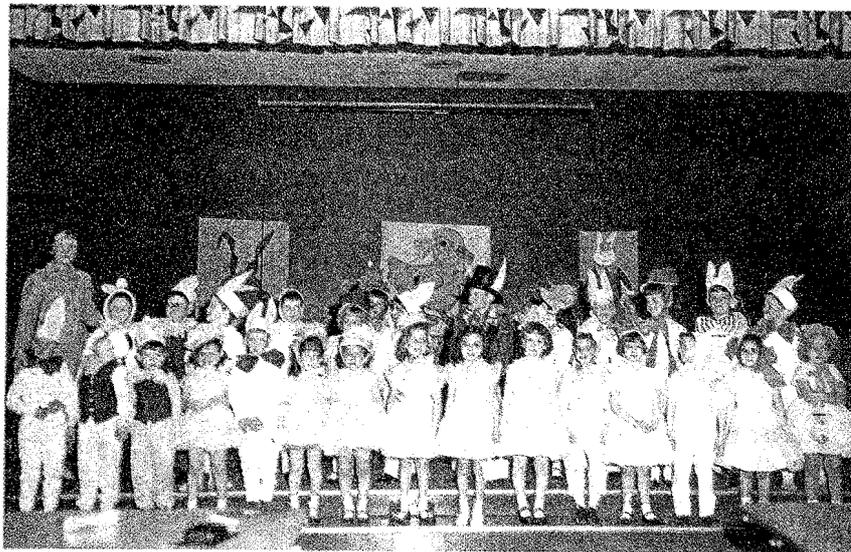
A favorite fifth-grade teacher, Mrs. Goldman, made the class subscribe to *The New York Times*.

"We went on many field trips," Dikowitz said, but recalled one particular trip to the United Nations. "We were so diversified as children. We were Jewish, Christian, black, Latino, Italian, and we were all together, so the UN was very special."

Indeed, in many of the classmates' photos, including the class picture with Mrs. Goldman, white students so outnumber black students that the latter were in the minority. And that was also the case with kindergarten and second-grade classes, a racial makeup that is the opposite of the community's demographics now, where black residents account for nearly 65 percent of the population, white residents less than 15 percent.



Carol Coffin Kneen, her mother Helen Coffin and Joey Tascarella peruse old photos with Valerie Dortch O'Connor and Jerry Dikowitz. At left, a 1960 photo of the four friends in their kindergarten class.



Despite the turmoil later in the decade and the community's changes in the years since, the classmates still speak glowingly of their old hometown and have selected a local charity to support that allows them to maintain a connection

to the community.

"I couldn't have picked a better place to grow up," said Karger's son, Robert, who now lives in Phoenix. "Nobody locked their doors back then, and every day after school kids would go knocking at each

other's houses to play."

Dikowitz, who lived at 45 Meyer St., recalled riding his bike around the block and returning with 20 friends to play a game, which could be stickball, baseball or football. "Sewer to sewer" — those

were the touchdown boundaries, said Jay Laurie, a resident of Delray Beach, Fla.

Little, who in 2007 became the first black president of United Way of Metropolitan Atlanta, remembers how he, Dikowitz, Howard Stern (yes, that Howard Stern) and a slew of kids in their group would bike over to the public works facility, which is now Centennial Park.

The weekends, Little noted, were dedicated to exploring nearby Nassau Road, where "there were popular restaurants, a bowling alley. The A&P and Associated grocery stores were directly across from each other and fierce competitors, but the Associated had a vintage feel, smell and look."

There was also the local five-and-dime store that carried a treasure trove of small toys, baseball cards, candy, comic books, and best of all, records.

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Roosevelt and the  
group of friends.  
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### Homegrown talent

In the 1960s, America and the kids of Roosevelt had discovered The Beatles, but they also had homegrown talent.

When they were 12 and 13, Dikowitz, Tascarella, Karger and Larry Malow, who is deceased, formed a band. "Plumbers Union" would practice in the basement at either Karger's or Dikowitz's house.

"We covered some Beatles stuff, The Young Rascals, The Dave Clark Five," Tascarella said. And when he moved away in 1966, Stern took his place.

"Plumbers Union" even had two go-go dancers. During practice, "My father would yell at us, but he loved it," said Dikowitz, whose house was a popular gathering spot for his friends.

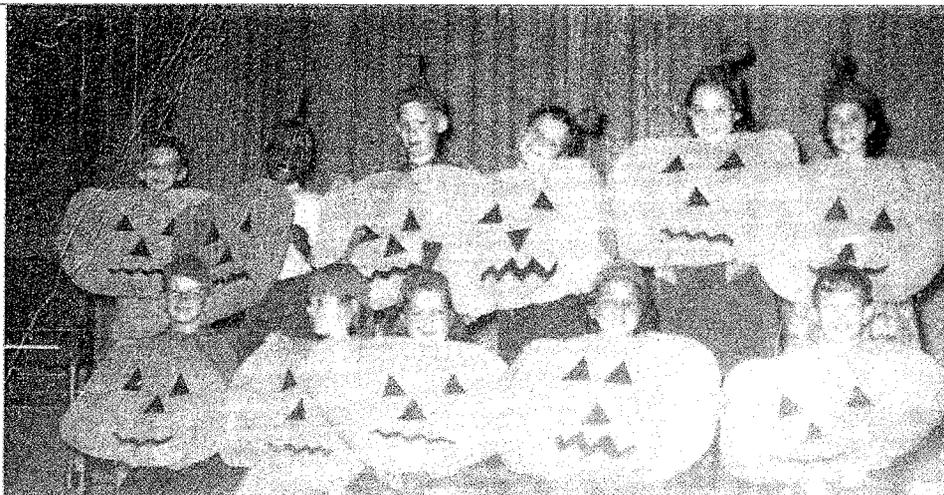
"I remember sitting at the kitchen table with him and his family," Little recalled, noting that growing up, he and Dikowitz were practically brothers. "I remember learning how to say 'supercalifragilisticexpialidocious' while eating turkey sandwiches that his mother prepared."

Little has many special recollections, but he and Coffin Kneen in particular shared a memory about being the two leads in their fourth-grade production of Gilbert and Sullivan's "HMS Pinafore."

"I sang solos in the play," Little said. And at the end he got to hold Coffin Kneen's hand, the hand of the girl every boy in the class had a crush on.

Little and Coffin Kneen recognized each other immediately some 40 years later, during a reunion Dikowitz arranged. He had longed to see his old friends for decades, because abruptly, their idyllic childhoods in Roosevelt seemed to come to a screeching halt.

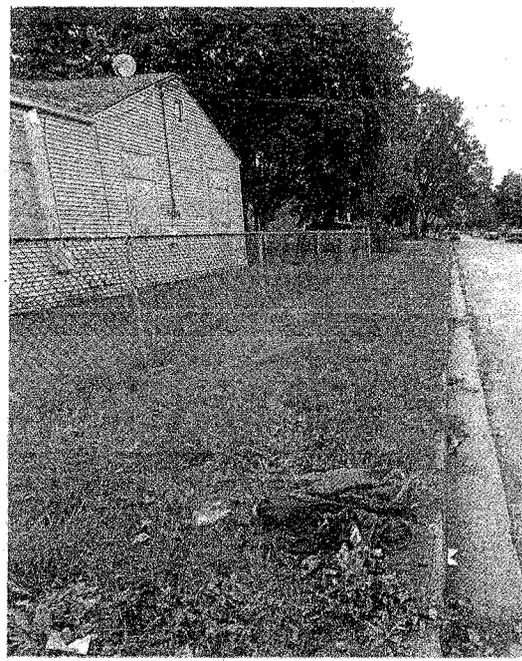
In the mid-1960s, Roosevelt's socioeconomic and demographic profile was changing. More families on public assistance were moving into the neighborhood, and as Roosevelt was becoming known as a dumping ground for welfare recipients,



A 1962 photo from second grade includes Larry Malow, now deceased, at right end of first row. In the back row are Milton Little, second from left, and future radio and TV personality Howard Stern, tilting his head in the center.



The Plumbers Union performs at Jerry Dikowitz's 1967 bar mitzvah with Howard Stern on vocals, Robert Karger on guitar and Dikowitz on drums. Stern replaced Joey Tascarella, who moved away in '66.



Boarded-up houses lie vacant on East Pennywood Avenue, around the corner from Dikowitz's former Meyer Street place. At left, Stern's childhood home on nearby Conlon Road.



Sister Aimee Koonmen, executive director of Bethany House, a Roosevelt nonprofit and shelter that has received donations from the old classmates since 2010.

## Thanks for the memories

On behalf of his group of childhood friends, Jerry Dikowitz wanted to do something for Roosevelt, the neighborhood they all loved but left behind long ago.

"We searched for a charity in Roosevelt. Bethany House won our hearts," he said.

That's because the nonprofit, run by executive director Sister Aimee Koonmen, provides comfort and shelter to those in need: homeless women and their children, in a homelike environment. The organization also offers them counseling

and other services that help them get back on their feet.

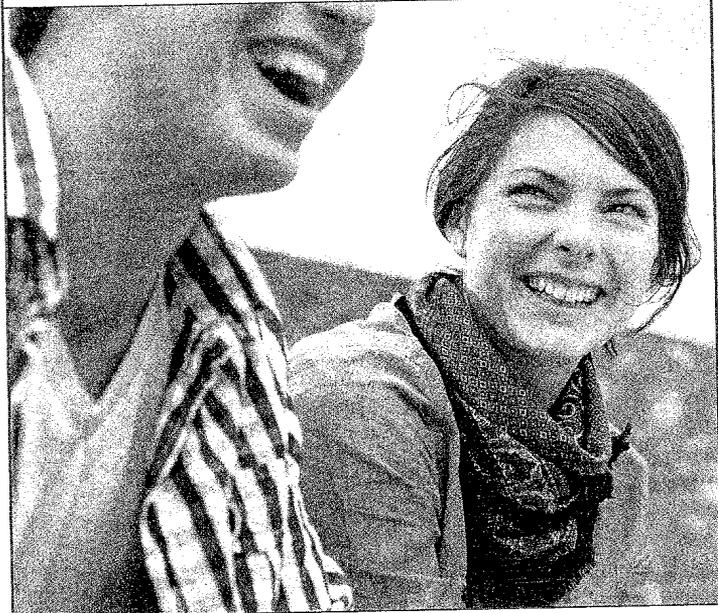
"They provide shelter, education and help people get jobs and contribute to society," Dikowitz said.

"It's a wonderful thing that people who remember their early years so fondly are willing to not just go beyond it but be willing to come back and help the place that nurtured them," said Sister Koonmen.

Since 2010, the group has donated money to help fund the organization. The ability to help is a privilege, Dikowitz said.

— CLAUDIA GRIVATZ COPQUIN

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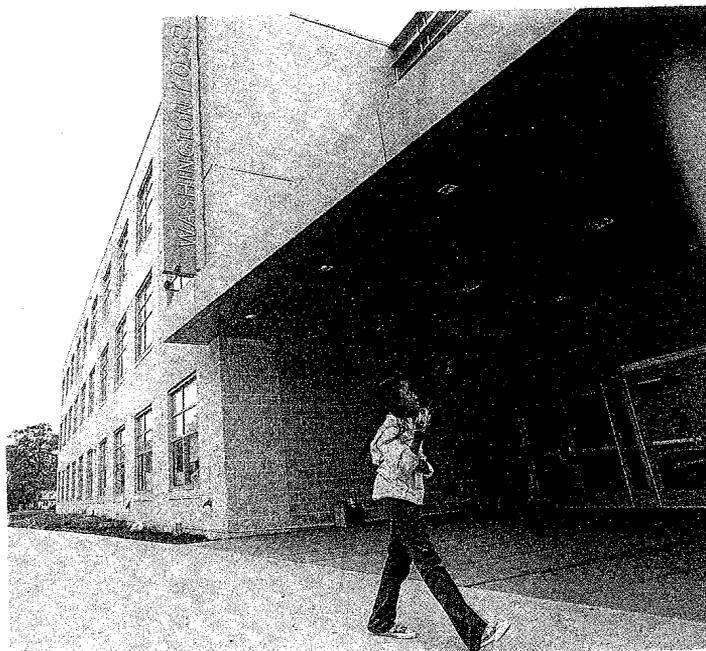


PHOTO BY LINDA ROSIER

A rebuilt Washington-Rose Elementary stands in the same Rose Avenue location. Joey Tascarella remembers morning walks to Carol Coffin's house, from where he and Carol "would walk the half-mile to school. I was literally 4, 4½ years old."

## Reuniting in Roosevelt

COVER STORY from G6

blockbusting, a racially motivated scare tactic used to sell houses at below-market value, was rampant.

"People would move out in the middle of the night," Tascarella recalled, adding that you never knew which of your friends would come back to school in the fall.

By the time Dikowitz and his friends entered junior high, their world had been transformed and their school days were often marred by bullying and fear.

"Some kids were terrorizing the school," Dikowitz said, recalling an incident where he was beaten outside a classroom. His family moved away when Dikowitz was 13, after his younger brother, Bernie, was mugged while walking the dog.

Tascarella said he was frequently held upside down in the bathroom, until his lunch money fell out of his pants, and Dortch O'Connor vividly recalled being threatened by some girls on her way to school one day.

Some of the friends never even had a chance to say goodbye. By 1968, most of them had moved. Time marched on but memories didn't fade. As adults, everyone wondered what became of their best childhood friends.

"We were friends so young, we never had that coming of age together," getting through adolescence, then teenhood together, Dortch O'Connor said. "It made

you wonder had we all stayed together, who would have gone to the prom with who, who would have married, who would have stayed friends in college."

Then in 1997, Dikowitz came across a newspaper article about Little's appointment as executive vice president and chief operating officer of the National Urban League. Without hesitation he made a phone call.

"I cried when I heard his voice," said Little. "It was an incredible gift. We found each other after so long apart."

When Little came to New York on business in the spring of 2009, he and Dikowitz had dinner, and talk of a reunion of their other childhood friends came up. With help from Facebook, many of them wound up back on Long Island later that year. They came from all over the country, gathering at the Long Island Marriott in Uniondale and dining at Pier 95 in Freeport. When they returned to the hotel, the party lasted well into dawn.

"I laughed all night," Dortch O'Connor recalled.

After reminiscing, the group visited their old neighborhood. And they discovered that while years had passed — bringing marriage, children, divorce, deaths — memories of their cherished childhood in Roosevelt had never waned. And the bonds that had formed so long ago were somehow still intact.

"We found each other!" Coffin Kneen said.