



The last segregated school

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It was a tumultuous year. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Sen. Robert F. Kennedy were assassinated. The Vietnam War raged. And riots blazed from inner cities as the nation endured the labor pains of the civil rights movement. The tight-knit senior class of Gibbs High School was Pinellas County's last segregated black class. But even as society boiled over around them, typical high school experiences prevailed. They planned a prom, posed for senior pictures and dreaded the tearful goodbyes that came with graduation. For 39 years, the class of '68 has celebrated that fateful year with a party. What started as an informal get together in a classmate's living room has turned into one of the community's signature events. Hundreds of people, of all ages, will flock to the Coliseum in St. Petersburg on Saturday night to celebrate and remember their steps into an unknown future.

Class of 1968

Sylvia Wells Moore

"The Party Starter"

Housing administrator, 57

Moore was home on winter break from Florida A&M University and asked her parents if she could throw a party. That little reunion party in 1968 was the catalyst for the annual Gibbs reunion event.

"The Vietnam War was going full fledge (in the winter of '68). We were seeing family members and friends that lived in our community not coming back home. And around that time we had the assassination of Dr. King, that took a lot out of our 'get up and go' because we felt if they could take the life of a well known and respected leader then the world is not safe for us. That was the beginning of us knowing that we needed to support each other. (The party) was a way of showing love and just sticking with each other."

Maxine Williams Salter

"School Sweetheart"

Day care operator, 57

"Our class is just like blood relatives, we're just that close. We're closer than, matter of fact, some of our relatives ...It's just a bond ... When I look back on the high schools today, kids are scattered everywhere and I don't think they actually have that bond, the quality, that love and appreciation for each other and their teachers."

Melvin Smith

"The Comeback Kid"

Club owner, 57

"I was living in New York and came back in 1993 ... one of the inspirations for me moving back home was after I came and experienced that 20-year reunion. There was so much of a positive vibe going around. I wanted to be a part of it. Being away for 20 years, I made a lot of friends but there was something about that high school experience. I tell my kids all the time, 'I had a better childhood than you did.' "

Alvin Frazier

"The Big Man"

Business owner

"Sports was an outlet for me. It was a means to an end. I set my goal when I was...about 10 or 12 years old to go to college. My mother had a seventh-grade education. My father had a sixth- grade education but he built his own house. He always stressed to me the importance of getting an education. They didn't push me, they encouraged me. And then my role models around me impressed me with their caring and in the way they lived and how they carried themselves. I felt getting an education was an opportunity."

Valerie Bennett Williams

"The Thinker"

Retired Progress Energy employee, 57

"At the time we were graduating we were going through a tumultuous time. I think it's indicative of all the seniors at that time. We lost great civil rights leaders, there was a war, there was just a sundry of activities. There was not a lot to smile about. In addition to that there was the event of going into the unknown. We didn't know exactly what our lot would be after we left Gibbs High School. Today, I can smile. But back in '68, there was more to it than happy-go-lucky. I was 18 years of age and I think we were shouldering a lot of responsibility to say we were 18 ... the world was in a state of flux ... "

Betty Anderson Morrow

"The Dancer"

Raytheon employee, 57

"Dance, for me, was a form of expression ... it was another part of me. I was always quiet and didn't say to much, but that was a time when people saw another part of me. Dance was more of a comforter. It was like a prescription or a healing as you would say. (When dancing) you were able to do something. So, to dance was to be able to do something other than turn on the TV and find the sanitation strike, turn on the TV and find your leaders have been killed, turn on the TV and find there was distress everywhere."