

Onward Harbord, upward for newcomers

Venerable Toronto collegiate that served as launch pad for generations of new immigrants celebrates 125th anniversary



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When they hand out awards for school spirit, Murray Rubin should be a shoo-in for top prize. He belts out the school song with gusto. He tells anyone who will listen how much he loves the place.

Once, when the basketball team lost a key playoff game, he was so upset that he went home, slammed the door and broke a window. But that was a long time ago, when he was student.

His school is Toronto's Harbord Collegiate, the famous immigrant launching pad that is celebrating its 125th anniversary this month. Mr. Rubin has not actually been enrolled there for 67 years. His high-school days ran from 1945 to 1950. He is 86 years old now. He is still nuts about Harbord.

"It's hard for me to impress on you how I feel about Harbord. It's so significant for me," he says, holding forth in the small room, filled with trophies, banners and class portraits, that is the school's in-house museum.

"I have priorities. The first priority is my family. The second priority is Canada. The third priority is Israel. The fourth priority is Harbord. And the fifth priority is Canadian tennis." A long-time player and fan, he then goes on about Milos Raonic's frustrating injuries and Eugenie Bouchard's latest loss ("What happened to her?").

Harbord was the making of him, as it has been for generations of kids from immigrant families. When he grew up, steps away from the school on Manning Avenue, the neighbourhood was the centre of the city's Jewish community. His parents, who came from Eastern Europe, were in the shmatte business – the rag trade. His father was a presser for Tip Top Tailors. His mother made dresses.

Harbord was, by Mr. Rubin's guess, 90 per cent Jewish then. It was a place of talented strivers. Ontario's top two high-school scholars were from Har-



Murray Rubin, who graduated from Harbord Collegiate in the 1950s, can still give a rousing rendition of the school song. 'Harbord made me realize that if you work hard you can succeed,' he says. FRED LUM/THE GLOBE AND MAIL



People from all walks of life and successive nationalities and cultures have worn the school colours over the decades. FRED LUM/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

bord. The school orchestra was top-notch. Its student actors and singers put on polished Gilbert and Sullivan shows: *The Pirates of Penzance*, *The Mikado*, *The Gondoliers*.

Many graduates found fame and fortune. The comedians Johnny Wayne and Frank Shuster; Toronto mayor Phil Givens; Sam Sniderman, the owner of

music mecca Sam the Record Man; symphony conductor Victor Feldbrill; civil libertarian Alan Borovoy; Frank Gehry, the renowned architect – all were students at Harbord.

Mr. Rubin, who claims he wasn't much of a student, went on to run a chain of pharmacies. "Harbord made me realize that if you work hard, you can

succeed," he says. "You don't have to be brilliant. I saw around me kids who came to Harbord from immigrant families, and at Harbord they learned to study and do well and get along with others."

In that sense, he says, "Harbord is in a little way what Canada is. Harbord is Canada" – a place where you can come from anywhere and make a life for yourself.

Mr. Rubin marvels at how generations of immigrant kids, one wave after another, have flowed through his old school. "After the Jewish kids, would you believe, the Italians moved in, and after the Italians the Portuguese, then the Asians, and all along that this was happening there were Ukrainians and Polish and Jamaicans."

Today, the downtown school on Harbord Street west of Bathurst is thoroughly cosmopolitan, as is the city around it. Just under half of its 1,100 students list a primary language other than English. The school has an active Portuguese heritage group. It had a Lunar New Year banquet this winter in recognition of its many students of East Asian background. It had a

school assembly for African Heritage Month.

In Mr. Rubin's day, when Toronto was still dominated by those of British heritage, Harbord stood out as an "immigrant school." Now just about every school in the city could be called that.

The whole school system is doing today what Harbord did then: setting up new Canadians for success. Toronto public schools are the factories of integration, turning kids from every corner of the world into new citizens. Harbord was the original factory, the start of a great and enormously successful civic enterprise.

Harbord likes its students to understand that inspiring heritage. Three grads, Willie Zimmerman, Ken Prentice and Julius Molinaro, founded the school museum. Kids come once a week to straighten it up. Harbord's archives class does research there. As part of the anniversary festivities, students will turn classrooms into "decade rooms," each marking a period in school history.

Mr. Rubin, of course, is in the thick of preparations for the Harbord 125th. The event is being organized with the help of two energetic women, Belinda Medeiros-Felix and Diana Da Silva, and others. It climaxes on April 28 and 29 with an open house and evening gala.

Mr. Rubin has been an active alumnus for decades, helping to raise money for scholarships, restore the school's First World War monument and raise a modern Second World War memorial.

At the annual commencement ceremony, he leads the singing of the official song, *Onward Harbord*, which involves a lot of "rah-rahs," "fight-fights" and even a "Sha-boom-boom-bah!" The crowd laps it up.

"When they start the school song and I come out front belting it out, I can see the pleasure in their faces. And I'm serious, I can see it. They're so happy that I am singing 'Onward Harbord, onward Harbord, On to victory!' I get a kick out of them getting a kick out of my exuberance. And it isn't put on."

No it isn't. Nearly seven decades after graduating, Murray Rubin is Harbord Collegiate's greatest cheerleader.