

# SCENES OF

By Vivian S. Toy

**H**AVING been out of high school for five years, I suspected there might be a few changes when I returned this fall for three weeks. The assignment: Get a sense of what high school

Sure enough, the styles and musical preferences had changed, girls were wearing a lot more makeup and practically all the girls (and some boys) used styling mousse in their hair.

On the academic side, it seemed as if less were expected of the students than when I was in school. Questions on tests and in classrooms required answers that usually could be lifted right out of textbooks with little analysis. Homework rarely took more than 1½ hours to complete each night.

The kids of St. Francis, however, were savvy in different ways. They could talk about the responsibilities of working 35-hour weeks at part-time jobs. And they knew how to get by with the little time they had for schoolwork.

I had graduated in 1981 from Phillips Academy, a private school in Andover, Mass., but I didn't have difficulty passing as a high school senior since I am only 23 and look younger. I attended classes daily, did homework, took tests, went to football games and to a school dance.

The St. Francis School Board and superintendent approved my stay at the high school, with the condition that the principal and my six teachers be informed that I was a reporter from The Milwaukee Journal. Students were told only that I was a transfer student from New York.

Being at St. Francis dredged up emotions that I'm sure are universal to anyone who ever has been to high

school. I worried about fitting in. Would I wear the right clothes? Would I say the right things? Would the kids like me? Would I look stupid in gym class in front of the boys?

In class, I worried about not sounding dumb but also about not sounding too smart. I hesitated each time I volunteered an answer or asked a question.

On one hand, my weeks at St. Francis made me long for the relatively carefree days of high school life. On the other hand, they made me realize how lucky I am to have the teenage years behind me.

Here are a few scenes from my school day on Friday, Sept. 12, about midway through my three weeks. Teachers' names are real, but students' names have been changed since they didn't know they were talking to a reporter.

**T**HE 7:45 a.m. warning bell rings just as I pass the entrance of my locker room. I rush to my locker to get my books.

My homework is in pretty good shape. I spent an hour last night finishing what I couldn't handle in study hall and at the end of classes.

## A reporter joins in on the classes, the concerns, the cavorting

In the hallways between classes, students meet friends briefly and release tension.

Study halls in the library at St. Francis High School sometimes provide the chance to pass notes.



# SENIOR HIGH

Classes today are shortened by five minutes to end the school day at 2 p.m. so that class meetings can be held.

There aren't very many people in the hallway this morning, just a few stragglers like myself and the few couples who linger by their lockers until the last possible minute almost every morning. Some of these happy

*Language arts IV* — A few jocks are talking outside the classroom, biding their time. I feel a little silly trooping straight into the classroom. Am I the only one

who worries about not being in my seat when the bell rings? But, somehow, they manage to be in their seats when the bell rings at 7:50.

Every Friday is "reading day" in English class. To get us in the habit of reading books other than textbooks, Mrs. McDermott had us check out library books at the beginning of the year. Instead of reading from read-backs of our own choice for the hour.

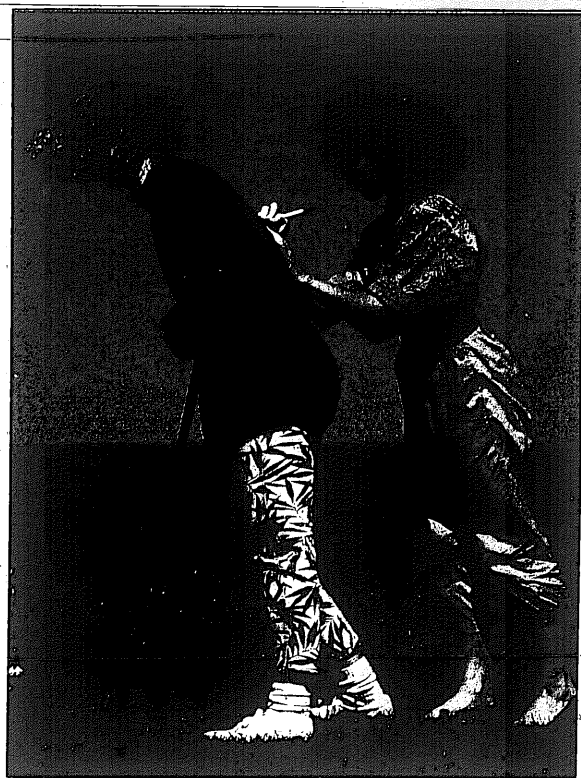
Almost all the girls are reading romance novels with names like *Did You Hear What Happened to Andrea?* or *One Summer in Between* or *To Take a Dare*. A lot of the boys are reading Stephen King horror novels.

About five minutes before the bell rings, kids start getting ready to leave. A few of the girls pull out their compacts and powder their cheeks or touch up their lipstick. Some boys comb their already well-combed hair. I wonder if my hair looks all right.

\*\*\*  
*Study hall* — The morning announcements come on as the day's lunch menu and locations for the afternoon class meetings are announced.

We're supposed to be studying in the library, but disruptions abound. Sue passes notes to me from the table

Continued



Physical education classes include playing golf on a homemade, nine-hole course on the school's front lawn. Here freshmen Laurel Bird and Cindy Germanson (writing) keep score.

Photography by Jim Gehrz

# SCHOOL

next to mine. We have to be cagey because if Mrs. McDermott catches us she's sure to yell at us. We're safe, however, because she's spending most of the period watching over three "220 girls," minority students bused in from Milwaukee under the Chapter 220 desegregation program. They are sitting at the other end of the room and making a lot of noise.

Sue writes in a note, "I can't wait until this day is over with." I ask her what she's doing after school and deftly drop the note on her desk on the way to the magazine rack. Sue doesn't have time to answer though, so as the bell rings she says, "I'll give this back to you when I see you in the hall."

**Computer science** — Terry hasn't done part of her homework. At first she says, "I just got in a bunch of

always goes through the aisles checking our homework, publicly humiliating us for our mistakes. We just laugh it off.

I offer to show her my answers. "I owe you one," she whispers over her shoulder. I know she'd do the same for me.

Mr. Bretzel gives us a 15-minute quiz. Afterwards, he goes through our next assignment and then lets us work on our homework till the end of the hour. Everyone gets right to work.

After a while, Terry turns around and tells me about a job she's going to apply for after school. She shows me other referrals she has gotten from the guidance office: busing tables, working as a cashier.



In the hallway at St. Francis, principal Steve Okonlewski talks with a student.

Terry sighs and says, "My mom's making me get a job because she's on this kick that she had to work when she was in school, so I should, too."

While Mr. Bretzel is in the computer lab helping some other students, Nina screams across the room to Mark, "Beth wants to go to Boston University!" Everyone expresses shock and dismay.

"In my dreams," says Nina, with some envy. Nina

says that she plans to go to the University of Wisconsin — Madison, because she, like most of the kids, is appalled at the hefty price tags attached to private colleges.

**Physical education** — On the way to the gym, Sue calls out to me and hands me the note we were passing during study hall. She has intricately folded it into a

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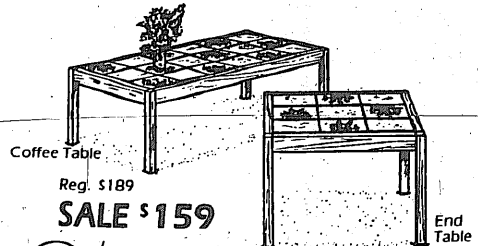
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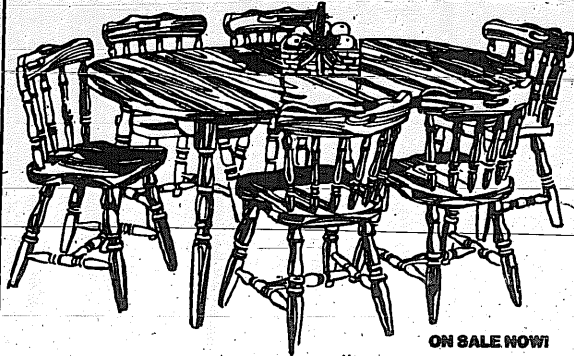
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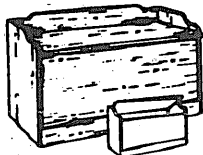
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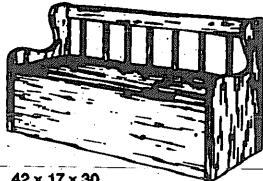
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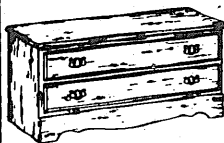
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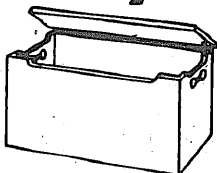
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## SCHOOL



Tamara Mayberry, a senior, chats with reporter Vivian Toy during lunch.

arrow form. It takes me a while to unfold it.

Sue writes about how she might have to stay after school to take a test because she was absent yesterday. She also says she has to get home and help pack the van because she's going up north for the weekend. She ends the note by wishing me a nice weekend.

Sue was one of the first people to notice me as a new transfer student and to make me feel welcome. I smile as I refold the note and stuff it into one of my folders.

After we get our golf clubs, Tina, Ellen and I head out onto the homemade golf course on the front lawn of the school. The class breaks up into groups of three or four to play the nine holes.

Of course the groups are all segregated by sex.

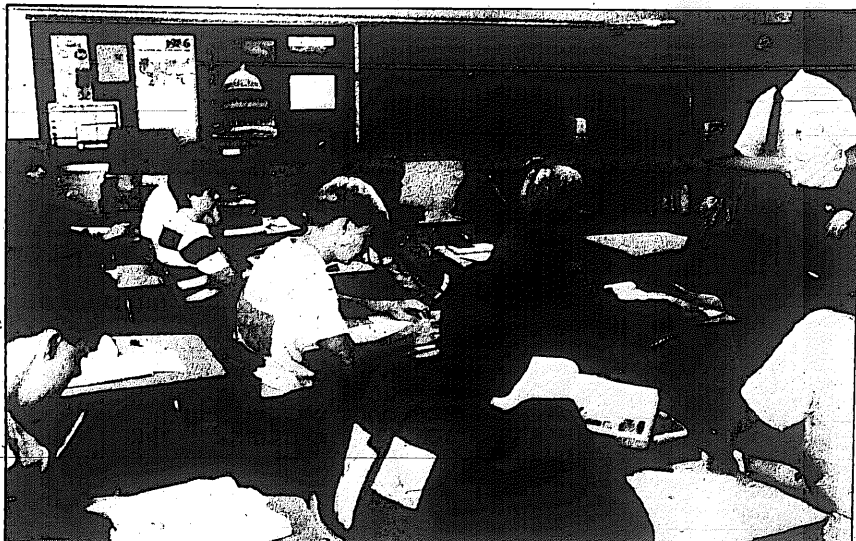
The boys' teams all try to show off and play through.

We hack away at the ball haphazardly, forgetting all the things the teacher has told us. We giggle nervously each time we send the ball a meager 2 or 3 yards.

Then when we see the teacher approaching us to check our form, we try our best to look diligent.

*Lunch* — Tim and Peggy talk about starting a drama club. There are no drama courses or school plays at St. Francis. Tim bemoans the fact that since he works after school this year, he hardly has time for anything. But he says he still wants to see a drama club established.

"Nobody ever uses the little theater," he com-



Gerald Wesolowski teaches an American government class.

plains. Tim and Peggy apparently tried to get something going last year, too.

Linda was at a cross-country meet in Alpine Valley last night. She proudly shows us the medal she won and we congratulate her. She tells us she didn't get home until 8 p.m., though, barely leaving her time to do homework.

\* \* \*

**Spanish IV** — The first thing Mr. Scherman does is collect our homework assignments. He gets to Linda, and she meekly tells him she doesn't have it. Mr. Scherman gives her until the end of the day to turn it in, after which he will deduct a grade for each day it is late. She just nods.

Then, Mr. Scherman has us write for seven minutes on the word "blue" — free expression. The goal is to get us writing in Spanish without worrying about getting the grammar right.



Jennifer Mattson (foreground) concentrates during American government class.

Afterward we sing songs and then eat Argentinian sweets that Peggy has brought to class for us. There are only seven of us in this class, which gives us the luxury of doing all kinds of fun things.

We don't get to the "dulce de leche," a caramel spread. So Peggy suggests that Mr. Scherman serve it to his next classes. But he hesitates, "I don't know, freshmen can be impossible." As well-seasoned seniors, we agree with him.

\* \* \*

**Algebra II** — Mr. Briselden is out sick for the second day in a row. He has left work sheets for us.

I feel a little bit sorry for the substitute teacher, who isn't even a math teacher. The class is disruptive. There's a lot of chatter, people turned around in their seats, talking, across aisles.

The sub tries to help us by asking for answers to the first question after we have been working for a while.

"Why did you put that answer?" he asks. And he gets responses like, "Umm, it looked good."

These kids obviously have much more energy than they let on when Mr. Briselden is in charge. With 10 minutes to go in the class, most books are closed and people are doodling on their notebooks, reading magazines, talking and laughing. The sub has surrendered.

\* \* \*

**Family living** — Some kids complain about having to take too many notes. We had to copy

three blackboards full of notes yesterday and there are another two pages worth today.

"My hand is falling off," Bob complains.

"Ms. Bahling, why don't you put it on a piece of paper and copy it for us?" Meg suggests.

"But then you wouldn't really absorb it would you?" the teacher replies. "You'd say, 'Oh, fine,' slide it into your notebook and forget about it, right?"

After she goes over the notes, Ms. Bahling  
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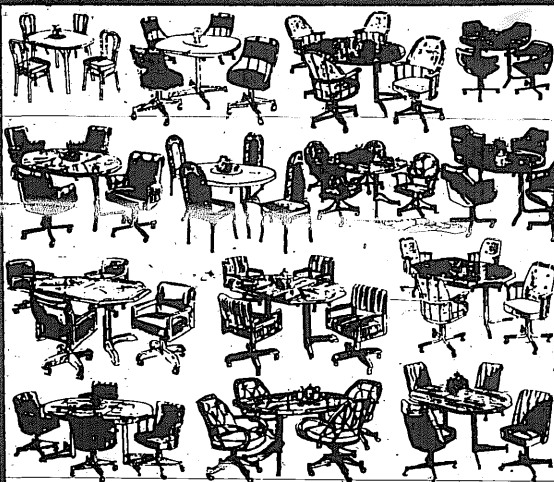
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# SCHOOL

splits us up into groups to devise ideal family situations. We have to answer questions such as how many are in our ideal family, what's its level of income, what type of housing does it have?

Most students don't take the assignment very seriously. Only one of the five groups actually produces anything worthwhile.

My group plays hot potato with our answer sheet because no one wants to be spokesperson.

One group chooses the Bronx as their home community, names the type of neighborhood as a slum and chooses tents to be their type of housing. We all chuckle at their presentation. Ms. Bahling laughs it off and goes onto the next groups.

the groups disband. We talk right over the announcements as we rearrange desks into orderly rows.

*Class meeting* — The seniors pile into the little theater for their class meeting. Everyone sits with a cluster of friends. The jocks take up a section in the front of the room and the freaks (kids who everyone assumes drink and do drugs) fill an entire row near the back.

The noise level is pretty high until Mr. Okoniewski, the principal and the senior class adviser, opens the meeting.

Candidates for various class offices step up to the podium to speak. Each says that he or she wants to serve the class and try to improve the school, except for one boy, who gets up and shouts out, "No comment." He gets a big round of applause.

One big concern is getting back the vending machines that were eliminated last year. The machines apparently were vandalized frequently and constantly getting jammed.

Of course, the cutest girl in the parade of potential class officers gets the most rowing applause and support. Even the freaks hoot and howl for her.

All she says is, "I was an officer last year and

I'd like to serve the senior class this year and that's all." Then she smiles, shrugs and starts moving away from the podium, enveloped in cheers and applause. She's the kind of girl everyone likes and some envy. She's cute, always looks put together, ever cheerful and pleasant.

After the speeches, Mr. Okoniewski discusses student council topics. The council has designated Sweatsuit Day and Red and White Day for later this month and has begun plans for homecoming.

Mr. Okoniewski asks about other possible theme days. The class shouts down some student council suggestions, which include Nerd Day ("We have enough nerds already! Who wants to be a nerd?") and Pajama Day ("That's stupid!").

The class boisterously suggests Freak Day and "To-ga! To-ga!"

We also ask for a powder puff football game. (Ms. Bahling, the student council adviser, told us earlier this week that a powder puff game was not being considered this year because of trouble with alcohol and general rowdiness at last year's game. Everyone vehemently denied that there was any drinking or trouble. "It must've been last year's seniors.")

We cheer when Mr. Okoniewski says he will report our requests to the council and adjourns the meeting.

It is 2:30 p.m.

Some kids head toward the gym to get ready for football or volleyball practice.

Others hang out in the parking lot or near the back of the building, smoking, talking, trying to decide what to do on the weekend.

Most kids, though, stream out toward the bus stop or to their cars and bikes to head home or to their after-school jobs.

The day is finally over. A sense of relief washes over me as I march out the front doors of the school, leaving behind the sounds of locker doors slamming and hundreds of sneakered feet shuffling down a narrow hall.

Out of the sheltered and ordered world of high school, I re-enter the real world.



Reporter and friends view the school's first football game of the season.