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## 'Sometimes you can go home again'

Reunion brings together former Marlow Heights residents

by Zoe Tillman | Staff Writer

Standing near a table with a stack of old high school yearbooks and a half-eaten plate of french fries at the Steak in a Sack restaurant in Marlow Heights, Chuck Fraley, 52, said not much has changed at the small diner since he went there as a teenager in the early 1970s.

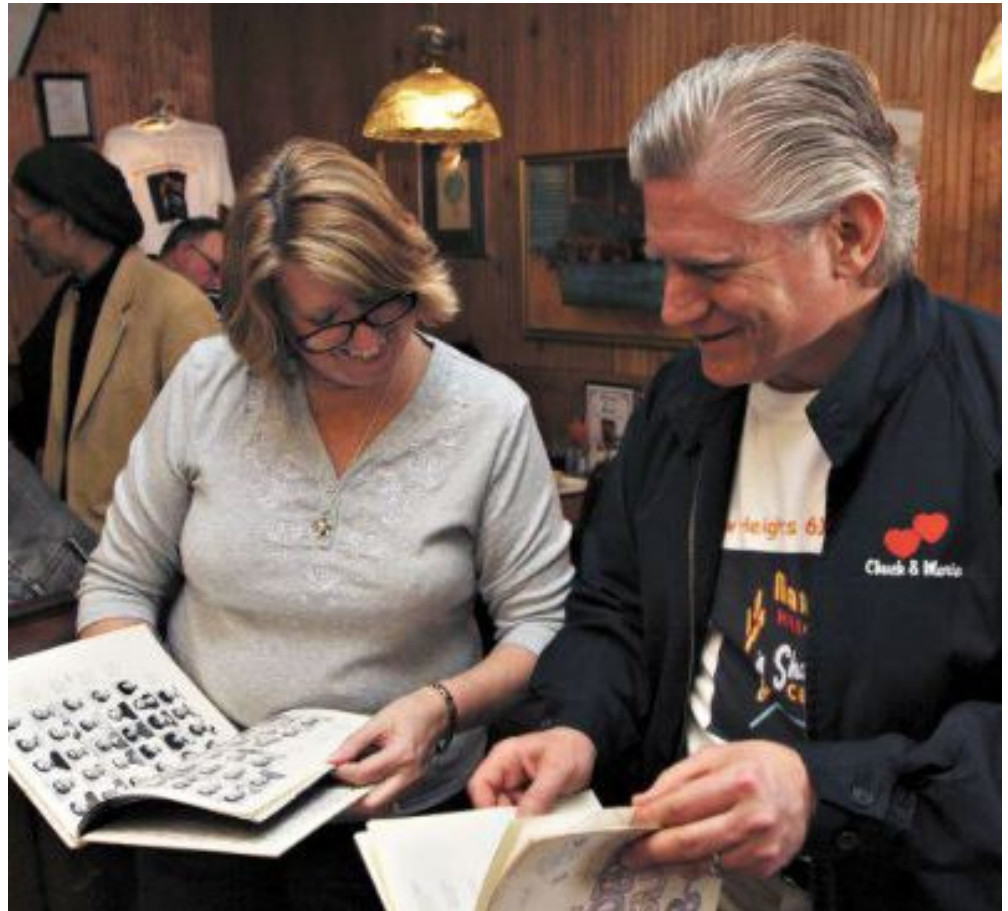
There used to be jukeboxes on the tables, and many of the surrounding stores in the Marlow Heights Shopping Center are different, but for a few hours Fraley and several dozen other former residents who gathered there March 27 said they felt transported back in time.

"Sometimes you can go home again, if only for a few hours on a Saturday afternoon," said Fraley, who now lives in Silver Spring.

Fraley grew up in Marlow Heights in the late 1960s and early 1970s. He hasn't lived there since his family moved away in 1973, but two years ago he began organizing get-togethers at the Steak in a Sack, a popular after-school and late-night hangout spot and one of the few businesses left from mid-20th-century Marlow Heights.

As word of the reunions spread, the crowd that descended on the restaurant several times a year grew. The first reunion, on March 26, 2008, attracted about 10 people, but more than 60 people showed up at this year's event.

Most attendees are in their 50s or 60s and live throughout the Washington, D.C., region, but Fraley recently said some former residents from the 1980s have signed his guestbook and are trying to reconnect with old classmates, friends or neighbors.



Leah L. Jones/The Gazette

Chuck Fraley (right), 52, of Silver Spring organized a March 27 reunion at the Steak in a Sack restaurant in Temple Hills for people who lived in the Marlow Heights area in the 1960s and 1970s. Patty Lleras (left), 55, of Waldorf was one of more than 60 people who attended.

"It's so nice to know there are people in this world who treasure the same memories you do," said Roger Howard, 55, of St. Leonard, who added that this was the second reunion he has attended.

Howard, like many reunion attendees, learned about the event from a Web site Fraley created in 2005, called Marlow Heights 60s and 70s, which catalogs photographs and memories of the area.

Fraley, who is an information systems security engineer, said he came up with the idea for the site while living in Florida and feeling "homesick for the D.C. area."

The Web site features an interactive guest book in which visitors can leave messages. Former residents of Marlow Heights, Hillcrest Heights and Camp Springs began responding within a month after Fraley launched the site. More than 800 people have signed the guestbook to date.

Fraley began planning the first get-together soon after moving back to the region in early 2006. Holding it at the Steak in a Sack was an obvious choice, he said.

"It's something that everybody identifies with," he said. "They came here for breakfast after church or a late-night meal after the clubs closed down."

Pat Lleras, 55, of Waldorf, said the Steak in a Sack was her "stomping grounds" when she attended Potomac Senior High School in Oxon Hill. Lleras grew up in Hillcrest Heights and learned about Fraley's Web site from friends.

"It's nice coming, seeing old friends," said Lleras, who has attended five reunions.

Steak in a Sack owner Dennis Kalid, 56, of Hyattsville, said he is happy to host the reunions, adding that he remembers some of the attendees from when his father opened the restaurant in 1962.

"A lot of people met their wives and husbands here," said Kalid, who estimates that he has witnessed at least eight marriage proposals at the restaurant.

In addition to the Steak in a Sack gatherings, Fraley organizes dances and trips to the beach and hopes to put together a reunion concert this summer for the Peppermint Pipers, a singing group at Benjamin Stoddert Junior High School in the 1960s.

"I feel very proud ... when I go to Steak in a Sack and I see the expressions on people's faces and it's clear they haven't seen each other in a long time," Fraley said. "This is how I'm contributing to other people's happiness."