

Ken Dryden tracked down his old high-school classmates to see how their lives unfolded since graduation

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Ken Dryden's most recent book is *The Class: A Memoir of a Place, a Time, and Us*.

In 1960, along with 34 other students, I was put into a “selected class” at Etobicoke Collegiate Institute, a high school on the outskirts of Toronto. With few exceptions, we stayed together until graduation. Then we went our separate ways. Sixty years later, I decided to search out my former classmates and see what had happened to them. To see how we had gotten from there to here.

Most of our parents were born during the First World War, reached young adulthood during the Depression, had their lives put on hold by the Second World War, then began to hit their stride as we were born, as Canada, with all its postwar possibilities, was about to do the same. We were part of the first generation of Canadians to go to university in big numbers. Our parents mostly came from working-class backgrounds with only high-school educations. Imagine what we, their some-day, university-educated sons and daughters, might do, they thought – daughters who, until this moment, after high school had been secretaries, or nurses, or teachers, gotten married, had kids and never worked outside the house again. With university awaiting us, it seemed we might do anything. Be anything.

What kind of life, what kind of country, what kind of future would be worthy of us?

I was going to be a lawyer, live a life that lawyers live, whatever that meant. Likely in Toronto, unless something took me somewhere else. I'd get married, and have kids, because that's how life worked, it seemed. And when I was much older, around 50, after I'd done lots of things and felt ready, I'd go into government. That's the word I had in my head then. The prime ministers of my youth – John Diefenbaker, Lester B. Pearson – what they did was “government,” not “politics.” Government seemed important. It seemed to matter.

Hockey filled my winters, and my imagination, but it wouldn't fill my future. The NHL was beyond me. Another world. After university, I'd stop playing and coach my kids.

But after I graduated from ECI, my life was one surprise after another. I graduated from law school, but I never practised law. I didn't stop playing hockey. I ended up in government, eventually.

A few years ago, I started thinking more often about my classmates. In the decades since high school, very few of us had stayed in contact. Some bumped into each other at random moments over the years, but that's about it. There had been hints in our Grade 13 yearbook about where we planned to go and what we were thinking – “FP,” short for “Future Plans” – but, I wondered: Where did they go? What did they do? What twists and turns, and surprises, had been in store for them – marriage, or not; kids, or not; divorce, or not? What choices did they have, or didn't they have? What decisions did they make? What triumphs and tragedies transformed their lives? After all these years, how was it going? How has it been?

And so, in early January, 2020, I started to track my classmates down. One led me to five or six others, who led me to a few more, and a few more. I found all but one of them. Six others had passed away. We began to talk. About three months later, COVID-19 hit – which gave us even more time to talk. We talked more often and for longer than I thought we would. One-on-one, over the course of two years. By phone mostly, a few times by Zoom. Our voices were the same; our faces weren't.

We had known something about each other from those high-school years, or thought we did. We now learned a lot more. We discovered things about each other that in high school had been there to see, in plain sight, and we had missed, as well as things we didn't know even about ourselves, others we had

carefully hidden away, and still others we wish had remained hidden. Dumb things others remember about us. The inner dork in us that no one, but somehow everyone, could see, and never forgot. Also big things we hadn't had time, nor any reason, to talk about before.

As my classmates took me through their lives, I realized I had to take myself through mine. I had to ask myself the same questions I asked them. Come upon answers I didn't know I'd find, that at times I didn't want to find. Answers which, at our age, are harder to undo, and redo, if we got them wrong.

I didn't know we'd get into all this. I'm not sure we'd have set out together if we did. But that's where all our meandering recollections, with all their seemingly-inconsequential details, where our pauses, asides and laughter, took us. Everywhere surprises.

About the country too. All its twists and turns during our lifetimes, from 13 million when we were born, to 40 million now. All the possibilities of the postwar years, when Canada was, it seemed, not what we were but what we were about to be. This was a from there to here story for the country too.

Then, one more surprise: arriving at age 76 and realizing that the story, for us, for Canada, doesn't end at "here." Tomorrow is another day. What now? What's next? For us, for our kids and grandkids, for Canada, for the world? What is our new there?

All these hours and hours of talks, it turned out, weren't about the past, about getting from there to here. They were about the future.

On Tuesday, Sept. 6, 1960, when we gathered in that classroom at ECI for the first time, I didn't expect this is where I'd be. I doubt any of us did.

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