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Mechanicsburg Schools

Mechanicsburg Area School District has maintained its own archives for 34 years

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William Murray, a retired teacher, has been the official archivist of the Mechanicsburg Area School District since 1990.

Jason Malmont, The Sentinel



JASON MALMONT PHOTOS, THE SENTINEL

The Mechanicsburg School District Archives collection dates from the early days of the school district to today.



The Mechanicsburg School District Archives collection has items ranging from clothing to programs to awards.



William Murray is the go-to person for answers about the history of the Mechanicsburg School District.

For William Murray, there is great satisfaction in knowing that he can educate and inform the public well into his golden years of retirement.

“What I enjoy most is the look on people’s faces when I tell them things or when I can do a workshop,” the Upper Allen Township man said. “I’m an historian and I keep learning new things.”

Since 1990, Murray has been the official archivist of the Mechanicsburg Area School District. That volunteer position is just the latest in his career in local education going back to 1974. His past jobs include social studies teacher and coordinator of the academic gifted program at Mechanicsburg Area Senior High School.

Today, this Philadelphia native is the go-to person for answers to questions on a broad range of history topics. To support his work, the district maintains an archives and museum in a converted ranch house at 502 S. Norway St.

Instead of paying Murray a salary, money is set aside in the annual budget for the upkeep of this repository located near the entrance to the Kindergarten Academy and district central office. Open to the public, people can call 717-506-1815 to schedule an appointment.

Brush with fame

Two years ago, a researcher from the A&E Network contacted Murray on the hunt for information on Bret Michaels, a former Mechanicsburg student who became the lead singer for the rock band Poison.

“There was not a whole lot on him,” Murray said. “He was not very active with the high school. I was able to locate class photos, including a picture of him as a member of the junior high school football team.”

It was not the district’s only brush with fame. Before becoming a New York Times best-selling author, Dean Koontz taught English in the district for almost two years shortly after his graduation from Shippensburg State College.

There are photographs of Koontz in school yearbooks along with news articles from when the author left the district.

The archives began about 34 years ago when Murray was teaching a course called Independent Projects for the gifted program. One day, he was called into a meeting with Lloyd Kramer, the assistant principal, and William Brubaker, chairman of the social studies department.

“They put information out in the district newsletter that they wanted to collect things that were school-related,” Murray said. “They asked me if I had any students who would be able to get it organized for them.”

Material soon rolled in for two students to organize into the beginnings of the archives. When the students graduated, the task fell on Murray who stored the materials in the gifted support classroom.

When Murray retired in 2005, the district moved the collection into the central office wing on the second floor of the Elmwood Avenue building. Five years ago, in 2019, the archives moved into its South Norway Street location when the district moved its office wing to the Kindergarten Academy, which was the former Filbert Street Elementary School.

A converted ranch house, the South Norway Street building includes exhibit space in the living room, dining room and hallway along with storage in its three bedrooms.

The archives have copies of school yearbooks and local newspapers going back to the 1920s. On one section of the museum is a display of photographs of school buildings that no longer exist. There are old diplomas and panoramic shots of graduating classes. There is a clock from the Simpson Street School before it was converted to apartments.

The collection includes a tiny version of a band front uniform that was worn by a young child, Murray said. As the story goes, the mother made the uniform because the child wanted to spend time with an older sister who used to practice twirling routines at home.

Varied requests

Over the years, Murray has gotten a requests from the public seeking information on school district history. Sometimes, Murray learns something new and unexpected from these queries.

“Someone wanted to know if the high school marching band participated in the 1964’s World Fair,” Murray said. “I didn’t have anything, so I reached and found a news article that said they did participate, so now that is part of the archives.”

Following numerous requests about Navy housing, Murray wrote a paper about how the federal government built 75 homes during World War II in a development known as the Broad Marble Heights for personnel manning the nearby depot in Hampden Township.

“When the Navy decided to get out of the housing market, they tore down all of the housing and donated the land to the school district that became the Mechanicsburg High School site,” Murray said.

In a more recent case, researchers wanted information about Raymond DeWalt, founder of DeWalt Inc., for this year’s 100th anniversary of that tool company. A businessman, Raymond DeWalt helped to organize the Wilcox program in the 1950s, which was a trade school in Mechanicsburg that preceded the present-day Cumberland Perry Area Careers & Technical Center.

For the anniversary commemoration, a crew from DeWalt visited Mechanicsburg for three days to take photos and video footage around the town and to interview sources at the high school, Murray said. DeWalt was acquired by Black & Decker in May 1960, according to an online history.