

Lee High memories celebrated

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Judy Collins, from left, Class of '73; Becky Bofinger, Class of '67; and Ginger Chance, Class of '67, lead a crowd of Robert E. Lee High School alumni and former faculty as they march in a jazz funeral Friday in honor of the closing school.

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- Published: Jul 18, 2009 - Page: 1A

The campus of Robert E. Lee High School was bustling Friday evening with hundreds of alumni, former faculty and friends, most of whom were likely visiting the school for the last time.

Led by the sounds of the Michael Foster Project, a brass-funk band, the crowd of more than 300 people participated in a jazz funeral to bid their school a jubilant farewell.

Before the first trumpet sounded, members of the Lee High family greeted former classmates with broad smiles and squeals of delight. Many of them were decked out in the school's colors of red, white and blue.

They strolled along the familiar sidewalks. Every now and then someone would peek through a window hoping to get a glimpse of the classrooms they once occupied.

"I've been here from the very beginning," former Lee High Coach Bill Bofinger said.

Bofinger started out as a freshmen when the school first opened in 1959. Six years after graduating in 1963, Bofinger returned to Lee High as a coach.

He remained there coaching football and other sports until the doors closed at the end of this school year.

"It was kind of sad," Bofinger said. "It's been a good school with good people in it."

On May 21, the East Baton Parish School Board voted 9-1 to close the school. The school faced a state takeover as early as August because of low standardized test scores.

The decision prompted a public outcry from some Lee High School alumni and supporters. Others, like Judy Collins, saw the closure as inevitable.

"It's kind of bittersweet," Collins said. "I knew it was time that it closed, but I'm going to miss it."

Lee High has been a sort of tradition of Collins' family. She graduated from the school in 1973. She also had two brothers and three children attend Lee High.

Despite her close ties to the institution, Collins said it was time for the school to close.

"It's not the same school. It's not the same atmosphere," Collins said. "The children deserve better."

Collins touted the jazz funeral as a "chance for everyone to get reacquainted with their former schoolmates and say goodbye to our school."

On Friday, the signs of aging were obvious all over the campus. The upper exterior of many window panes were stained green and black with mold. Outside benches lay broken on the ground and rust dotted the school walls.

The appearance of their beloved school did not seem to bother the crowd. The atmosphere at the funeral had an air celebration, instead of mourning.

As the band began to play renditions of jazz stand-bys like, "When the Saint's Go Marching In," the rowdy crowd danced behind them. True to the fashion of the New Orleans second line, they danced through the parking lot and into the school's gymnasium.

Trumpeter John Gray taught music at Lee High three years ago. The sound of his brass trumpet echoed within the walls of the school's gymnasium on Friday, home to thousands of Rebels and Patriots — the school's two mascots over the years.

Gray has played at many jazz funerals. He called this one the most personal one he's ever attended.

"I taught here. It's an EBR school. It's kinda sad to see that go," he said.

After the processional, Lee High alumni, faculty and their families got out the ice chests and settled in for a night of reminiscing about the good old days.

They chatted about getting caught smoking on campus and their weekend party plans. It was as if they were all back in high school.

Becky Bofinger, class of 1967 and wife of Bill Bofinger, came up with the idea of a jazz funeral in honor of her alma mater. She led the crowd wearing a red, white and blue feather boa and a big smile.

"I think everybody could relate to it," she said. "We're putting a great place to rest."