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As memory of past blunder fades, yearbook program turns the page

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(Matt Rocheleau for Boston.com)

Fourteen-year-old eighth grader Thatiana Bellamy of Mattapan works on several yearbook pages at a computer lab in the John D. O'Bryant School of Mathematics and Science in Roxbury.

By Matt Rocheleau, Town Correspondent

Twenty-three students are determined to defy the expectations of more than 1,000 of their schoolmates, nearly nine out of every 10, who have not yet signed up to receive a yearbook.

Few if any O'Bryant School of Mathematics and Science students, including current yearbook club members, were there or even know that the class of 2006 didn't get their yearbooks until 2008. Still, the Tigers' annual memory-filled tome has been a tough sell; asking their skeptical teenage peers to commit \$65 for the book can create situations ripe for "awkwardness and disappointment," according to yearbook staff.

But the club is excited and confident that some radical changes, both to how the book is organized and more importantly to its look, length, structure, style, and content, are the start of a new tradition and a model for other

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yearbook staffs in Boston's school system.

"I think next year there will be a lot more people buying them," said 15-year-old sophomore Kerlie Merizier of Hyde Park – one of the 23 who've worked around four hours weekly outside of regular class time since September to compile the yearbook that is expected to be ready for print this week.



(Matt Rocheleau for Boston.com)

The staff is nearing yearbook completion

Among the biggest changes: instead of using the "Senior Book" format of past volumes this year's will include students across all grades from seventh through twelfth. Each of OB's 1,200-plus students, along with their faculty and staff is mentioned at least once and around 85 percent, nearly the same ratio that has not yet bought a yearbook, are mentioned or pictured twice

"It's not only the popular kids; that's what I like about it," said Thatiana Bellamy, a 14-year-old eighth grader from Mattapan.

(To read Globe coverage of the school's two-year delayed 2006 yearbook, [click here](#).)

And, as the yearbook club's new adviser, English teacher and Arlington resident Betsy Lazo explained, it's more than just "senior wills, superlatives, and remember whens."

There are journalistically reported stories illustrated through photography and wrapped up in creative page designs the yearbook staff have been working on all year.

It's more detailed and memorable than the traditional yearbook format, Thatiana said.

"When I went to my old school, it was just pictures, and I didn't really like that," she said. "A name and class number – that doesn't really tell you about who you are or what you do."

Instead, OB's 2011 yearbook will feature school-wide accounts of the past academic year across five sections – "Academics, Classes, Clubs, Sports and Student Life."

On Thursday the school's computer lab was buzzing as the yearbook club put the final touches on its 160-page, hard-cover masterpiece for nearly two hours after classes had dismissed.

Kerlie was finishing the design of a yearbook spread that will share tales of interesting and exotic places students went over the summer – from Hawaii to Italy to a local program through Harvard University. Seniors Stephanie Robinson-Clark, 17, of Roxbury and Christina Perry, 19, of Dorchester finished coverage of the school's "Poetry Out Loud" contest that included an OB student who won



(Matt Rocheleau for Boston.com)

Yearbook production print-outs.

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the state championships and is headed to the national competition in Washington, D.C.

Eighth graders Ana Bueso, 14, of Roslindale and Anna Quan, 13, of Charlestown teamed up to finish pages about Halloween that included a school costume contest winner decked out as a dinosaur.

And Thatiana filled in captions from school pep rally photos on pages about "OB P.R.I.D.E." – the school's acronymic motto of "Perseverance, Respect, Integrity, Discipline, Excellence."

"I don't want to be like 'hey, these are five people holding a sign,'" she said pointing to the caption space below a photo. "I want to explain what's happening."

This came from a young girl who said she was unhappy with the grades she had been getting at the beginning of the year. She said she was a frequent procrastinator when it came to schoolwork, especially on lengthy essay assignments.

"I didn't even know how to write very well or how to interview," she said.

But, through the yearbook club, she's honed her skills and has noticed results in the classroom. She received help from other yearbook club members and the club's adviser Ms. Lazo, who is also Thatiana's English teacher.

Out of her own desire to improve how she crafts stories, she's read through others' work saved in a software program the yearbook staff uses to design the book. And, she's written three stories of her own and edited two others along with having helped work on design and other aspects of the yearbook.

"I think I've improved. I've definitely learned not to wait until the last minute," she said with a smile.

Looking toward a group of seniors working several computer stations away, Thatiana added, "I'm not at their level yet, but soon I will be."

A learning process

Her improvements highlighted what students throughout the computer lab acknowledged Thursday – they'd learned something new and enhanced various skills.

Kerlie, who wants to go into journalism, has improved her writing, reporting and photography skills. For stories they wrote, Anna and Ana researched and learned about odd phobias and that sleep disorders and eating disorders can often go hand in hand.

"When I first joined the yearbook club, I'd always call Ms. Lazo over and be like 'I don't know what I did,'" said Ana. Now, she still asks for help from time to time, but she needs it "a lot less."

The club's adviser, in her fourth year teaching at the school, took over the yearbook-leading role in September after it had been "passed around like a hot potato from year to year." She has seen her students grow and was also taught something through the production process.

"Eventually, I learned to step back and let them do their job - obviously, mistakes are inevitable of course, but it made students better at their job," Ms. Lazo said, via e-mail following up after Thursday afternoon's production.

"Without me even forcing the yearbook students to do this, I often hear

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students reading their work out loud and asking questions like, 'How can I make this sound better?'" she added. "These are the moments I live for."

Through a mix of training and trial-and-error, club members have learned about marketing, salesmanship and getting turned down. By joining the staff, in asking their peers to buy the yearbook and from writing stories about other students, they've met a lot of teens they'd pass in the hallways of the Roxbury school building every weekday.



(Matt Rocheleau for Boston.com)

Laetitia Dorsinville, 16, of West Roxbury.

Thatiana remembered hearing announcements over the school's loudspeakers in September about how the yearbook club would be different this year. Aside from major changes to the final product, the club began allowing students from any grade to join, instead of a seniors-only policy, which limited the average interest to a five to 10 person staff and average soft-cover yearbook size to be between 75 and 100 pages in recent years.

"Those announcements – they really draw you in," she explained.

"The announcements are like 'if you don't know how to do something, we'll teach you.' That's what I like about yearbook club. They come with open arms."

Several students, namely seventh graders and others that are new to the school, said they joined in part to meet new friends and get to know their school better. For some, like sophomore Laetitia Dorsinville, 16, of West Roxbury, their primary reason for joining was to improve on writing, design, photography and interviewing skills. Some joined out of curiosity about how the book is made. Students like 13-year-old seventh grader Marcos Hernandez wanted to have an afterschool activity to help their future educational and job pursuits.

For others, including eighth graders Stephanie Nwaford, 13, of Dorchester and Vivian Yu, 14, of the South End, motivation came in part from being able to receive extra credit in class for their yearbook club participation.

Some want to become writers when they're older. Others like Thatiana, who wants to become a doctor, have non-writing-focused professions in mind. And, Ana doesn't know yet what she may want to start a career in. For now, her yearbook club work "is just for fun."

The book will be published by Walsworth Yearbooks. The company had published an award-winning yearbook program's work during Ms. Lazo's first two years at William Boone High School in Orlando, Florida.

The yearbook is on track to come out the first week of June as scheduled, and 250 copies in addition to the 150 books reserved, will be ordered, said Ms. Lazo. She did not know prior year's sale figures, but said in recent years copies had typically been delivered the fall after the book's target audience of high school seniors had graduated and moved on.

"I'm kind of excited that we're branching out from past yearbooks," said Stephanie. "It wasn't as well known in past years."

Improving through setbacks

But the publication has faced hurdles and stumbled at times.

An original 45-member volunteer crew eventually dwindled to its current 23. The initial goal to mention or photograph each school member at least three times was cut to twice instead. And, running the club more like a business, including offering early-bird pricing specials, did not generate as much revenue as hoped.



(Courtesy: O'Bryant School yearbook club)

The yearbook's cover design.

A lack of yearbook buyers – 350 shy of the goal to sell 500 copies – caused the original plan for a 248-page book to be trimmed by 88 pages in order to stay within the club's budget. Its production is funded by book sales, senior ads, and business advertisements.

"Unfortunately, as much as we tried with all of the local businesses, we did not hear back from not even one of them," said Ms. Lazo, who because of the shortfall plans to put her stipend, given to yearbook club advisers in the school district, toward production costs. "It was very difficult to put ourselves out there going door to door selling ads."

The most significant production glitch came last Thursday. On what was supposed to be the staff's final day of production, students learned that a slew of computer files containing completed or nearly completed articles were lost.

Fourteen-year-old Brighton eighth grader Janice He and Edie Aaron, a 15-year-old sophomore from Dorchester, were among those who lost stories. While they conceded to feeling somewhat let down, neither expressed being particularly upset or frustrated.

Thatiana said she was actually glad a story she'd written at the beginning of the year vanished: "It's a good thing that it got lost. I didn't do as well back then with that one as I have with the stories since."

"Each time something like this happens, and we have to start from scratch, it always gets better," said Ms. Lazo.

Facebook vs. a real book

The staff realizes modern technology, namely online social networking, will often be a point raised by students and other critics who question the significance of yearbooks nowadays. But the club has its arguments to volley back.

"I have a Facebook, and I love Facebook because you can talk to people," said Ana. "But with this you'll always have it just the way it is."

"Someone might take down a picture on Facebook. And, you could've liked that friend's picture, but you'll never see it again," Thatiana added.

"The yearbook serves as a time capsule of the way things were - no matter how much we change as we grow, we can look back and see where we came from," Ms. Lazo said.

"I will never forget in 2003, watching the Ms. America Pageant on TV and seeing one of my former schoolmates in Orlando, Erica Dunlap win the title,"

she continued. "The first thing I did was go back to my yearbook, look her up, and you could see how she had risen to something like this: drama club, talent shows, public speaking."

In fact, Ms. Lazo said the book was named "Print" in part because "it's a homage to the concept that print will prevail over forums like Facebook, and also we are the Tigers, which makes us think of paw prints," she said.

The cover's text will read "It Starts Today" and "2011 Print." The cover's design was inspired by a photo one of the teacher's students, Cassandra Guzman, took of another student Lunie Louis at a football game.

"You couldn't see her face at all, but I really liked the emotion it captured," Ms. Lazo said. "I took her outline and filled it with the extra pictures of the students because her spirit captures the spirit of all O'Bryant students - that no matter how different we all are, we are all connected by this OB spirit."

The yearbook staff hopes their work this year has laid a foundation for future club members.

"By the time we're seniors, we'll have experience and we'll have new seventh graders who are learning. So, the yearbooks will keep getting better and better," said Ana.

"I'm really excited to see the final copy," she added. "It's our memories; it's important."

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(Matt Rocheleau for Boston.com)

English teacher and yearbook club adviser Betsy Lazo helps answer questions from a group of yearbook staff members Thursday afternoon. This year's staff is comprised of: seniors Kayola Davis-Tabb, Zarina Jamal, Anya Vanessa Jean-Pierre, Christina Perry, Stephanie Robinson-Clark and Jade Arnold Scott (part time photographer); sophomores Edie Aaron, Terrence Coston, Laetitia Dorsinville, Judnise Guillet, Cuong Linh, Iryelis Lopez, Kerlie Merizier and Suzette Schand; eighth graders Thatiana Bellamy, Ana Bueso, Selina Dam, Amal Egal, Janice He, Stephanie Nwaford, Anna Quan, Vivian Yu; and seventh-grader Marcos Hernandez.

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