

FADE TO BLUE



FROM 1926 THROUGH 2018, ALLEGANY HIGH SCHOOL OF CUMBERLAND, MARYLAND, WAS LOCATED ON SEDGWICK STREET IN AN AREA KNOWN AS CAMPOBELLO. IN 2018, THE NEWLY CONSTRUCTED ALLEGANY HIGH SCHOOL OPENED FOR CLASSES AT 900 SETON DRIVE, THE FORMER LOCATION OF SACRED HEART HOSPITAL.

Written by: **Dan Whetzel**

Who could have imaged that a routine summer activity would spark events connecting thousands of Allegany High School alumni? And who would have predicted the Allegany community's celebration of Campobello throughout the year?

When the fate of Allegany High School's Sedgwick Street campus became widely known, graduates began to informally share memories. Through the efforts of Michael Hunter Thompson, an alumni artist, those conversations quickly focused around a series of photographs, interviews, exhibits and a book titled *Fade to Blue, A Tribute to Allegany's Campobello*. Allegany supporters rallied around *Fade to Blue* to celebrate the Sedgwick Street school's legacy even as the building was being slated for demolition. *Fade to Blue* and related community events have become celebrations of the Camper spirit.

Michael recalls the day during the summer of 2019 when the idea for what became *Fade to Blue* occurred. "I was at Allegany on Sedgwick Street playing fetch and walking my dog. There had been local news stories about the building being broken into and vandalized. So, I walked up the staircase on the side of the gym and peered in out of curiosity. What I saw in the gym sparked the idea."

While many visitors viewing the gym floor would have condemned its condition and moved on, Michael's creative eye for photographic composition saw a unique opportunity amid the chaos. "The way the light was coming into the gym and illuminating the strange pattern of thousands of footsteps in the white dust covering the basketball court caught my attention. I thought it would be interesting and emotional to stage a basketball photograph in that setting."

News of Allegany's pending demolition gave a sense of urgency to Michael's idea for a photography project inside the school—creative photos would be a way to preserve its memory. To determine if there was interest in alumni being the figures in the images, he posted the idea on Facebook. "And it just clicked," recalls Michael. "People were overwhelmingly interested."

While alumni responded favorably to the idea, the reality of completing the project was far from certain. The building was not only off limits, but in poor condition. Natural deterioration and destruction by vandals had left the interior a mess. It was also uncertain if permission would be granted to enter the building, particularly after the pandemic caused restrictions to be placed on public gatherings.

Michael contacted Jake Shade, Allegany County Commissioner and alumni, to make inquiries about granting access for a photography project. "He gave the green light and from there I worked with Adam Patterson, Director of Public Works, who established time limits and access requirements. I only had five weeks to organize and execute it before asbestos abatement work started."

Communicating through Facebook, Michael arranged for 30 photo shoots, in and outside the abandoned building, with 500 former staff and alumni as figures in the images. The photos captured as many cross sections of high school life as possible in the short time frame. The sessions also became informal reunions when classmates reminisced during the scheduled settings.



Top: Walkers and drivers arriving at the school to participate in Michael's conception. Along with other staged photos, Michael attempted to get a selfie of each group as they participated in the project.

PHOTO COURTESY DOUG SCHWAB

Middle: A group of mostly drama club alum pose for a selfie with Michael in the Auditorium.

PHOTO COURTESY JOANIE JOHNSTON

Bottom: A gathering of different age groups at the entrance to the high school. By the end of the project over 500 former staff and alumni came together to participate and reminisce in informal reunions.

PHOTO COURTESY DOUG SCHWAB

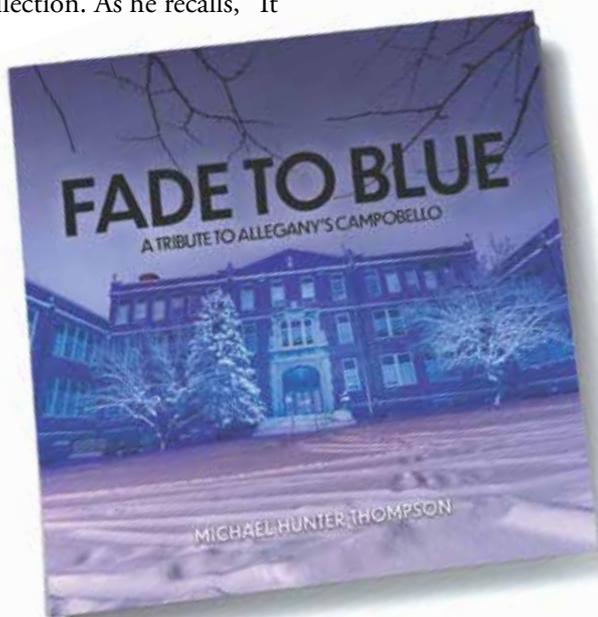
As the conversations continued, it became apparent to Michael that capturing them would be a complementary component to the photograph collection. As he recalls, “It became clear that participants wanted the project to be captured in book form and they wanted to share stories.”

Creating and implementing an oral history program took *Fade to Blue* into a different and unfamiliar realm for Michael, but over a period of months 100 interviews were recorded, reviewed, and summarized for publication. Participants’ graduating years ranged from the 1940s to more recent times.

The concept for the *Fade to Blue* publication came from a coffee table book that Michael enjoyed. “Each page has a work of art. I think that it allows the image to breath and the reader to fully focus on that one piece. I figured that concept would work for this project...each image on its own page. A very minimalistic, clean design,” states Michael.

The book’s title is unique and generates positive comments. Inspired by film makers references to ending a scene by steadily reducing brightness until the screen turns to black, Michael’s goal was to creatively capture images of Allegany’s campus and alumni before the iconic landscape of Sedgwick

Street changed forever. *Fade to Blue* became a natural extension of the film makers term, a book title and general reference to community events.



Michael Hunter Thompson’s *Fade to Blue*, is a 148 page, full color hard bound 11” x 10” book. It contains 39 photographs from photo shoots along with 100 personal oral histories written from interviews conducted with the participants.

The present Allegany High School, located on Seton Drive, became involved in the process as Michael and Brian White, social studies instructor, discussed ideas about additional events. The conversations became more earnest as memorabilia and artifacts began to appear at photo sessions and through photographs posted on Facebook. Brian recalls, “Michael started to be the recipient of lots of Allegany stuff that was donated to the project. Michael also realized there was no way he could utilize all of the donations, but they did spark an idea—

Historical Research Methods students could create an exhibit for the Allegany Museum on the history of Allegany High School. Together with the *Fade to Blue* exhibit, the Allegany community will have an amazing opportunity this July to reflect, learn and be inspired by our legacy.”

The amount of memorabilia and photographs proved to be daunting. Students became involved in cataloging, interpreting, and organizing resources for the exhibit. The hands-on approach to primary sources is the defining



feature of Historical Research Methods class that has produced a series of oral history publications, videos, public presentations, and virtual tours of the Campobello campus over the past two decades. In recent years students focused on documenting the Sedgwick Street building; digitizing class portraits, photographing rooms, and cataloging trophies were priorities. Brian credits his students for their efforts, “I am very grateful for some fantastic students in completing our work in preserving our school’s history and legacy.”

The Allegany Arts Council also partnered and supported the program from its formal inception. Michael recalls, “I proposed the show to the Arts Council exhibition committee. It then grew to having my photography, as well as parts of the Sedgwick Street school installed in the space which myself and a small team of Allegany enthusiasts removed.”

Julie B. Westendorff, Executive Director of the Allegany Arts Council, notes that, “Michael Hunter Thompson has been a long time artist member of the Arts Council and served on its photography committee. Through the years his work has changed to include more cinematic and ‘staged’ shots, so when he came to us with this idea, we knew it was going to be an exciting adventure.”



Michael Thompson with some of the memorabilia collected for the exhibition in July. He is sitting on a row of four original auditorium seats. PHOTO COURTESY MICHAEL THOMPSON

Bottom photos (left to right): Jim Cook (1968), Chad Dick- en (1998), Kevin Sellers (1967), Beth Beeman Martin (1998) and John Lange (1967) in the boy’s locker room, showing their sports memorabilia. PHOTO COURTESY JOANIE JOHNSTON

Generations of cheerleaders in front of the gymnasium coming together to help Michael with his photo project.

PHOTO COURTESY DOUG SCHWAB

Wes Abrams, 90, made the trip with his daughter from Rockville to Cumberland to participate in the outdoor football photo shoot. PHOTO COURTESY DOUG SCHWAB

Arrowette alums posed for photos in the old gymnasium.

PHOTO COURTESY JOANIE JOHNSTON

“Voted Most Likely to Stay Together” — 1956 graduates and high school sweethearts that remained together, Shirley and Calvin “Pete” Baker, pose for Michael at the dance photo backdrop. PHOTO COURTESY DOUG SCHWAB





Above: Some of the Allegany High School Historical Research Methods students creating the *American High School Experience* exhibits. Left to right: Phoebe Puffenbarger (artwork), Sofia Kucher (research/writing) and Chassady Redhead (quilt construction).

Right: One of the large panel displays to be exhibited at Allegany Museum in July 2022.

PHOTOS COURTESY BRIAN WHITE

Julie also realized the impact the exhibit would have on the community at large. “Although I didn’t attend school in this community, I immediately understood the nostalgia which surrounds it. For good or bad, that experience leaves an impression on all of us. Whether you attended Allegany or not, there is something special about going back to that place, wherever yours might be, even if for a little while.”

There will be several exhibitions running concurrently in downtown Cumberland venues. According to Julie, “July 2022 will feature a series of exciting exhibitions and activities for the *If These Halls Could Talk* program, featuring the *Fade to Blue* exhibit at the Allegany Arts Council and *The American High School Experience* to take place at the Allegany Museum. The photographic exhibit at the Allegany Arts Council, will include 40 images Thompson took incorporating generations of Allegany alumni, along with artifacts he salvaged from the building. The Allegany Museum exhibit is being curated by current Allegany High school students in the Historical Research Methods class, and will include



photographs, memorabilia, and even a replica of the Sedgwick Street building made of Legos.”

As demolition of the old Allegany High School progressed, the timing of the program could not have been better. Adds Julie, “The loss of such an architectural piece of our history could be very sad, but this project has taken that sadness and reinvigorated more than five generations of memories. It is a testament to the selfless work of an artist who wanted to preserve the heart of a community, and it reinforces the importance of artists living and working here. Some years ago, Michael said his long term goal was to become a full-time artist. Part of our work is to support local artists and assist them in chasing their dreams — it has been a privilege to be given a front row seat to this journey.”

The opportunities and events offered to preserve Campobello’s legacy is impressive — *Fade to Blue* and *If These Halls Could Talk* will long be remembered by alumni who celebrate the fitting farewell to Sedgwick Street memories.

Michael Hunter Thompson expressed his immense appreciation for the financial grants from the Allegany Arts Council and Maryland State Arts Council throughout the project.



Allegany High School Lego Model

Allegany’s Historical Research Methods students commemorated the Campobello campus in a unique way during the 2021-2022 school year. The idea occurred when Drake Rose, a senior enrolled in the course, observed a model of Fort Cumberland displayed at the Allegany Museum. As Drake recalled, “I thought it would be cool if we could do something similar for Allegany High School.” Acting on the initial idea, it was decided to move forward using Lego’s as building material to replicate the school building. Collaborating with classmates Daniel Gregory and Cole Fiscus, the Sedgwick Street building was photographed and later replicated on Minecraft, a video game that creates three dimensional images. The scaled-to-size Lego model stretched to eight feet in length and required 35,000 Lego blocks.

The project required interdisciplinary skills that stretched beyond typical social studies classes. “We collaborated with classmates and consulted teachers throughout the school for advice, particularly Tech Ed. A lot of thought went into the project,” recalled Drake.

Daniel added, “I started by taking multiple photographs of the exterior and found a lot of interesting oddities, like different color bricks that were used in the construction. I also focused on structural details within the building.”

Cole recalled, “This project was very different from anything else I have encountered in school. We worked for 45 minutes every day studying engineering and other aspects of the structure. It was very rewarding to work on such a creative project that a lot of people will be interested in seeing.”

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Drake Rose and Cole Fiscus at the beginning phase of the Lego project (above). The old Allegany High School was meticulously photographed and replicated on Minecraft (inset) to create the scaled-to-size model.

PHOTOS COURTESY BRIAN WHITE

Allegany High School Lego Model *continued*

Brian White, instructor for the class, also highlighted the collaborative and interdisciplinary aspects of the Historical Research Methods course and Lego project. “We touched on so many disciplines this year—math, engineering, as well traditional historical research. It is rewarding to know the Lego replica will be preserved for all to view in the future.”

Students expressed gratitude to alumni for Lego donations. The students and Mr. White also expressed gratitude to Canal Heritage Authority, Allegany County Commissioners, Allegany Museum, Doug Schwab and Betsey Hurwitz-Schwab, and Allegany Arts Council for grants and support during the project.

Following the *American High School Experience* exhibit at the Allegany Museum in July 2022, the Lego replica will be permanently displayed on the first floor of the present Allegany High School on Seton Drive.



3 Pershing Street
Cumberland, MD 21502



Top: Cole Fiscus and Daniel Gregory working on the gym wing of the Lego model.

Inset: Completed gymnasium.
Above: Front entrance with windows in place.

Left: Auditorium wing in progress.

PHOTOS COURTESY BRIAN WHITE

If These Halls Could Talk: A Tribute to Allegany's Campobello

July 2022 Events

Fade to Blue: A Photographic Journey

Allegany Arts Council, 9 N. Centre St.,
Cumberland, MD • July 2 - July 30
Tuesday – Saturday 11 am – 5 pm

Allegany: The American High School Experience

Allegany Museum, 3 Pershing St.,
Cumberland, MD • July 2 - July 30
Wed – Fri, 1-4; Sat 11-4; Sun 1-4

Friends of Fade to Blue VIP Reception and Book Launch *Limited Ticket Event*

Allegany Arts Council, 9 N. Centre St.,
Cumberland, MD • July 8; 6 – 8 pm

Public Opening Reception

For both exhibitions, July 9; 2 – 6 pm

Allegany High School Camper Class Reunion Celebration

Canal Place, Cumberland, MD • July 9
4 – 9 pm

Fade to Blue Gallery Walk & Talk with Michael Hunter Thompson, Allegany Arts Council, 9 N. Centre St., Cumberland, MD • July 23

Michael will be available for book signings at the Fade to Blue limited ticket event at the Arts Council on July 8th and the Gallery Walk & Talk, July 23.

Michael Hunter Thompson's website:

<http://www.michaelhunterthompson.com>

Allegany Arts Council website: <http://alleganyartscouncil.org/> and

<https://www.alleganyartscouncil.org/upcoming-events/if-these-halls-could-talk-a-tribute-to-alleganys-campobello>

Allegany Museum website: www.alleganymuseum.org