

MAJOR MILESTONE



ONE OF GAINESVILLE'S OLDEST MIDDLE SCHOOLS CELEBRATES A MAJOR MILESTONE

# Fort Clarke at Fifty

WRITTEN BY PEGGY MACDONALD

**IN 1973, WHEN FORT CLARKE MIDDLE SCHOOL WAS CONSTRUCTED, IT WAS THE FIRST MIDDLE SCHOOL TO BE BUILT IN GAINESVILLE AFTER ALACHUA COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS HAD BEEN DESEGREGATED.**

A plaque located at the school's front entrance includes the names of Alachua County School Board members who were instrumental to school desegregation. The plaque also lists Bill Hunter as one of the architects who designed Fort Clarke. According to the Modern Gainesville website, some of Hunter's other projects include the Paynes Prairie Visitor Center and the original bat house at the University of Florida. Fort Clarke's original library featured a sunken pit with midcentury modern accents.

Fort Clarke's design was in keeping with the experimental spirit of the 1970s. The school had no interior walls,

except for one that separated the school's front and back halves. When classes began on Sept. 4, 1973, the school followed an open education model intended to promote collaboration and creativity. Moreover, schools without walled classrooms and hallways typically cost less to build compared to traditional schools.

William Cake, Fort Clarke's first principal, reported in an Oct. 1973 Gainesville Sun article that students had a positive reaction to the school's "open concept" policy, which he said applied to the cafeteria as well as classrooms. "The atmosphere is one these kids can really feel comfortable in," he said. "This was the whole idea behind designing the building. No walls confine the children into individual blocked-off classrooms, and no teacher monitors the lunchroom."

In theory, this innovative school design promotes



When Fort Clarke opened in 1973, its “wall-less” design reflected an experimental “open education” philosophy. By the 1980s (top left), makeshift partitions separated classroom spaces. The school’s mid-century modern library (bottom left) featured a sunken pit. The school was later remodeled to resemble a more traditional school (bottom right, 1994).

student agency, giving children more intellectual freedom. However, in practice, “open classrooms” foster noise and organization problems. At Fort Clarke, students sat at shared tables instead of individual desks. The lack of well-defined halls and doors made it challenging to navigate the different classes. Teachers used bookcases and partitions to transform open spaces into separate classrooms.

Sally Rist, who worked as both a teacher and a guidance counselor starting the year Fort Clarke opened, said she loved having no walls. However, paper airplanes would occasionally come flying over the bookcases that served as substitute walls and makeshift partitions blocked the view of nearby classes only when students were seated.

“Classes had to be conducted quietly,” Rist recalled. Teachers seldom raised their voices because hundreds of people could hear them if they did. Teachers who were accustomed to having their own classrooms frequently complained.

At the end of the 1992-1993 school year, an extensive construction project began at Fort Clarke. After two decades, the “school without walls” philosophy was no more. The academic areas were renovated in two stages, and 25 portable classrooms were added. The cafeteria and library were renovated in the final phase of construction. Today, the school has separate hallways for each grade

and hallways extending from the administrative offices to the media center and cafeteria. Each grade-level hallway has individual classrooms and computer labs. Portable classrooms, a gymnasium, and a separate band and art building surround the main building.

Fort Clarke’s hallways are themed according to the color and character of each grade level. The sixth-grade hallway, “Frogtown,” is green and painted with frog murals; the seventh-grade is orange; the hall is decorated with tiger paintings; and the eighth-grade, otherwise known as “Fat City,” is pink and has flying pigs. The grade-level mascots coexist with the official school mascot, the Falcon. According to veteran Fort Clarke reading and language arts

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teacher Sara Wellman, the Falcon replaced the original school mascot, the Patriot, because parents thought the musket-toting Patriot was too violent. The school was named after nearby Fort Clarke, a nineteenth-century military fort located approximately 10 miles south of Newnansville, the former county seat of Alachua County.

While the buildings at Fort Clarke changed, the sense of community remained. "There was a family feeling at Fort Clarke," Rist explained. She stayed at the Fort for 34 years. Gainesville native Patricia Parker attended Fort Clarke in the early 1980s and has taught at the school since 2003.

"It was an honor to return to the Fort," Parker said. "The students always find a way to teach me something new about life, myself, or the new generation." Parker perfected the art of teaching under the tutelage of some of her former teachers, including Sally Rist.

Kijofa Ellis attended Fort Clarke in the 1990s and has worked there since 2008 when he subbed in the cafeteria. He received a permanent position in the cafeteria in 2009 and has received the Employee of the Year award multiple times, including the 2022-2023 school year. In February, Ellis left the cafeteria to become the in-school suspension teacher. "One thing I want from this position is for students to learn self-awareness and accountability," Ellis said.

Ellis enjoys having time to sit one-on-one with students. "I want to help them," he said. "We all do." When Ellis was a student at Fort Clarke, teachers made a big difference in his life. "One of the most influential teachers was Mr. Young, and he wasn't even my teacher," Ellis recalled. "I feel more at ease with him still being here."

Another familiar face at the Fort is Debbie Rodenbaugh, who started teaching with Alachua County Public Schools in 1976. Since 1994, Rodenbaugh has taught math at Fort Clarke. She taught all three of her children algebra when they attended the school. "It was wonderful to teach my children and their friends," Rodenbaugh reflected. She said the experience made her a more compassionate teacher and strengthened her understanding of adolescents.

Rodenbaugh said the most challenging part of her teaching career was adapting to teaching online during the pandemic. However, she has enjoyed teaching students from all over the world and working with colleagues she refers to as the Fort Clarke family. "The most rewarding part of my job is the 'Aha' moment when my students understand a difficult concept, as well as the 'Aha' moment when my students teach me something."

Everett McConnell retired in June after teaching band at Fort Clarke for 25 years. McConnell taught not only music but also life lessons. "I see my role as one of teaching students about life and life choices," he explained. "We talk about a lot of difficult subjects in my classroom." The Fort Clarke band room still has what McConnell said are likely the original chairs.

John Young's classroom is also filled with furniture



(Top) Fort Clarke staff member and alumnus Kijofa Ellis with his 1990s yearbook photo (inset).

from the school's early years. Like Rodenbaugh, Young is entering his 30th year as a teacher at the Fort. Although he worked for four years at Camp Crystal before starting at Fort Clarke, this was his first classroom teaching job. In 1994, Young taught in a portable while the school was undergoing construction. He has taught in his current

High School before taking the reins at the Fort—his first major challenge as principal was navigating the COVID-19 pandemic. “One of the most frustrating things for me was when we couldn’t work together face to face,” Taber said. “Teachers have to work together. It’s not a job you can do in a silo.”

**The 1982 yearbook changed the Fort Clarke Middle School acronym into a reflection upon the middle school experience: “Middle school is a journey filled with Friends, Classes, Memories and Students.”**

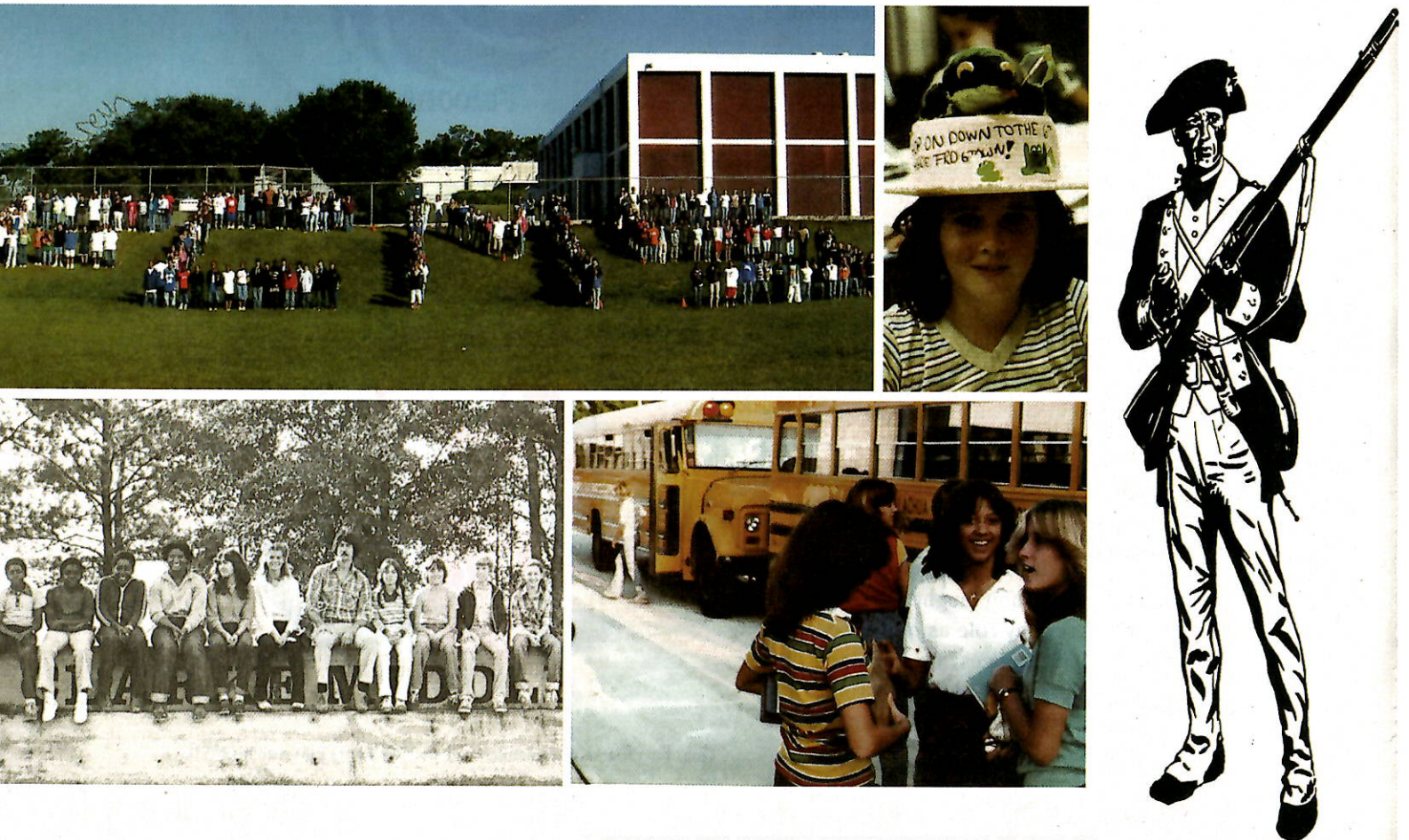
classroom for 21 years. As a first-year teacher at the Fort, Young was conscripted to dress up as the Patriot mascot for a special celebration with the school’s original principal, William Cake. The school had a wide range of spirit days and other fun events for the students in Frogtown, Tiger Turf (formerly known as Seventh Heaven and the Rainbow Connection), and Fat City. “We had team activities all the time,” Young remembered.

Today, it is Principal Jared Taber’s turn to dress up as the school mascot. The Fort Clarke PTA raised money to purchase a new Falcon costume in 2023, and on the last day of school, Taber was the first to wear it. A former Westwood Middle School Whirlwind, Taber served as a social studies teacher and assistant principal of Buchholz

Moving forward, Taber looks forward to students being able to have fun again at school. Student clubs, sports, and spirit days made a triumphant comeback in the 2022 – 2023 school year. “The PTA took the lead this year with activities,” Taber said. The PTA had a strong year, from a Halloween costume contest, school dances, and kickball tournaments for students to holiday decorations and teacher appreciation events.

The 1982 yearbook changed the Fort Clarke Middle School acronym into a reflection upon the middle school experience: “Middle school is a journey filled with Friends, Classes, Memories and Students.” These snapshots of the Fort Clarke experience from the past 50 years are sure to take you down memory lane. **OT**

Scenes from Fort Clarke’s first 50 years, including the Patriot mascot, which was replaced by the Falcon.





Cynthia Lewis



Everett McConn



Lauren Poe



Tarcha Rentz



Lynne Whitesides



Linda Williams



Tammy Meyers



Georgeana Moore



Debra Rodenbaugh-Nelson



Anne Shaughnessy



Elaine Young



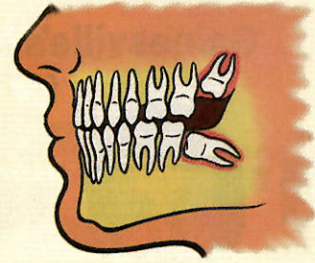
John Young

## Do your **Wisdom Teeth** Hurt?

**Wisdom Teeth**, or **Third Molars**, are usually the last teeth to develop and appear in the mouth. They are called "**Wisdom Teeth**" because they usually appear during a person's late teens or early twenties, which has been called the "age of wisdom". The normal position for developing **wisdom teeth** is behind the upper and lower second molars. However, often times the mouth does NOT have enough room for these extra teeth and they become **impacted**.

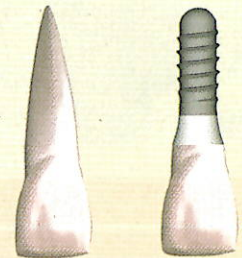
This can lead to very serious dental health and medical problems such as pain, infection, crowding of teeth, cyst development, loss of other teeth, or development of pathologies that could lead to more serious surgery. In fact, for nine out of ten people, at least one **wisdom tooth** remains under the gum tissue due to lack of space in the mouth.

Proper treatment of **wisdom teeth** involves their removal using special surgical techniques appropriate for each individual case. **Wisdom teeth** are best treated by a specialist, like an **Oral & Maxillofacial Surgeon**.

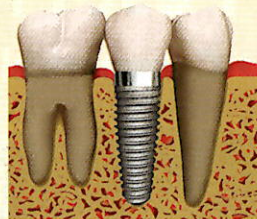


## What are **Dental Implants**?

**Dental Implants** are titanium anchors placed in the jawbones, underneath the gum tissue, to support artificial teeth where natural teeth are missing. **Dental Implants** are actually placed in the jawbones, and don't require removal like regular dentures or partials, nor do they require the removal of natural tooth structure like crowns and bridges. They look and function like natural teeth. **Dental Implants** can be used to replace a single tooth, multiple teeth, or even hold dentures



in place, eliminating the need for denture adhesives. **Dental Implants** can restore normal eating and speaking abilities, and enhance your facial appearance and confidence. **Dental Implants** are best placed by a specialist, like an **Oral & Maxillofacial Surgeon**, working closely with your restorative or general dentist.



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