

Macomb Township Chronicle (MI)

Erie Elementary music teacher searches for past alumni School to celebrate 20 year anniversary May 19 with music, art, food

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CLINTON TOWNSHIP - Chippewa Valley's **Erie Elementary** is turning 20 years old this year. And to celebrate the school's second decade, music teacher Erica (Vattese) Latowski is trying to track down **Erie** alumni to sing in a choir during the birthday celebration on May 19, 2010. She said now is the perfect time to arrange such a choir because the youngest **Erie** alumni should be right around 9 years old. The oldest, she said, should be turning 30 this year.

The school was built and opened in 1989-90, and some teachers in the Chippewa Valley district are part of **Erie's** first graduating class.

"I just thought it would be great to have the reunion concert on that evening because it's such a big event for us," said Latowski, a Chippewa Valley High School grad. "There are (alumni) kids that I've taught participating, and a few people responded that I don't know. I also have teachers in the district that went to **Erie** that are participating." Jill O'Neill, seventh-grade math and English teacher at Iroquois Middle School, is an **Erie** grad. She also likes to sing, being a former member of the Chippewa Valley High School choirs.

When she heard about Latowski's search for alumni, she jumped aboard.

"I actually was the first graduating class at **Erie**," O'Neill said, adding that she was the first Mrs.

Claus in the school's traditional Christmas play put on by fifthgraders each holiday season.

O'Neill said there are a few different reasons she joined in Latowski's effort.

"Well, first of all, I'm good friends with Erica. ... I'll do whatever it takes to support her," she said. "But I think it's a great idea, with working in the district, to support the district; and there's a bunch of us that are teaching in Chippewa Valley that graduated in the district.

"Plus, anytime I can sing is good." So far, 40 **Erie** alumni have signed up to sing. Latowski is hoping to track down 60 more.

The choir will sing with **Erie's** current choir, which is made up of about 65 **elementary**-aged students. Latowski said she just started picking the music and hopes to have rehearsals at varied times beginning in January.

"I really wanted to show the past and the present, so I'm looking at songs that people would know from when they went to **Erie**, as well as music that choirs are familiar with now," she explained.

The May 19 celebration will feature a student art show, music performances, craft stations and refreshments. A spring celebration is put on every year, but this year it's going to be different, said Janet Grifka-Smith, one of the first teachers hired at **Erie**.

"I've been a teacher at **Erie** since '89, so I am one of the oldtimers here," she joked. "And there have been quite a few changes since then." **Erie Elementary** is on its third principal; there's been a huge fluctuation of staff members since '89; and the demographics of the school's population have changed dramatically since it opened, she said.

"But, at the same time, we feel very lucky to be here," she continued. "I've taught many families and, in fact, I'm on child No. 4 for a lot of families now." She said while Latowski didn't go to **Erie**, two of her cousins did; and both of whom had Grifka-Smith as a teacher at some point.

Although Grifka-Smith herself didn't go to **Erie**, she did go to Ojibwa and then on to Wyandotte. She graduated from Chippewa Valley High School.

She's very fond of the Chippewa Valley district.

"I opened my classroom, and I not going to leave it." Students and staff at **Erie** have been given 20th year commemorative T-shirts to celebrate the school's birthday on the 20th of every month until May. Grifka-Smith said she's glad she can be a part of it.

She and only four other current teachers have been with the school since its inception.

To participate in the **Erie** alumni choir for the school's 20th birthday celebration, send Erica (Vettese) Latowski an e-mail at elatowski@cvs.k12.mi.us, including your name, phone number, address, when you attended **Erie**, and if you're a current a student in the district, what school you attend.

You can reach Staff Writer Erin McClary at emccclary@candgnews.com or at (586) 279-1118.

Caption:Photos by Davis Schreiber Above:**Erie Elementary** music teacher Erica Latowski leads her class in caroling Dec. 4. Latowski is not only preparing her choir students for **Erie's** 20th birthday celebration next May, but she's also seeking out **Erie** alumni to sing during the event. Right:Students and staff at **Erie** dress in commemorative T-shirts once a month throughout the year to celebrate their school's 20th anniversary.

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