

# SUNDAY BEST

*Your Guide to Life, Leisure, Shopping & Dining*



Social networking sites challenge traditional get-togethers

## OR FACE-TO-FACE?

By **LISA INTRABARTOLA**  
CORRESPONDENT

Whatever happened to: the gym class hero, the queen bee, the teen dream you wapped spit with under a stairwell during those precious few moments between biology and algebra?

Once upon a time, satisfying curiosities about your former high school classmates required a decade-long wait. There was little way of knowing whether the guy who rocked that feathered mullet now camouflages his receding hairline with a Trump-esque comb over, if the high school hottie and head jock are still head-turners, or if that bully ever got what was coming to him. Unless, of course, you ponied up for a

plate of chicken marsala and a seat at the local banquet hall for your high school reunion.

But that was all B.S.: Before social networking sites.

Now, thanks to Facebook, anyone with an account can catch up with former classmates whenever they're feeling nostalgic — and without having to buy a new frock or revisit adolescent insecurities. With such easy — and often anonymous — access to personal information, are traditional high school reunions going the way of Walkmans and rotary phones?

Not a chance, said Bari Belosa, who's organized more than 9,000 trips down memory lane — including Gov. Chris Christie's recent Livingston High School Class of 1980 30th reunion — since founding the Englishtown-based Reunions Unlimited Inc. 29 years ago. Belosa believes Facebook's got nothing on face-to-face reunions "because talking to people on Facebook is not a real reunion. All it is is talking to people on Facebook," she said matter-of-factly.

"Fortunately for us, people want to see people and talk to them and hug them and exchange baby pictures. There's no substitute for talking with somebody or dancing with somebody or having a drink with somebody. It's just the human experience. If you really want to touch that very special time in your life, you want to be in a room with people who went to high school with you."

Facebook, which has been in the spotlight recently due to the Academy Award-nominated film "The Social Network," was more help than hindrance for Marcene Talty of Brick, one of the coordinators for Brick Township High School Class of 1970's recent 40th reunion.

"It definitely helped us locate people. You always know one or two people (who are) on Facebook, and they know one or two people, and so on and so forth," she said. Talty didn't get the impression from former classmates that finding friends on Facebook prior to the reunion deterred them from attending.

"I didn't hear that from anybody, that they didn't want to go (to our reunion) because they already knew what was happening with people," she said. "If you want to sit at your computer and find 325 people, you can certainly do that. I don't have time to do that. I think people enjoy seeing people they haven't seen in a long time."

In fact, Talty only signed up for the social networking site to track down people while planning the event. Turns out the impending reunion drew many of her classmates to the site for the same reason. Talty, who still lives in Brick, said she was pleased with the turnout: 80 people from the 325-member class attended the Oct. 9 reunion at an Elks Lodge in town.

Belosa, who said she's watched most of her competition go belly up over the years, has embraced Facebook as "a tool in a multipronged approach" for locating prospective party guests and suggested that Facebook and sites of its ilk may be responsible for improving reunion attendance.

"There are some reunions that fell off, but most of the reunions are intact, and they are bigger because we have more methods to find people."

However, Belosa is quick to point out that when organizing a reunion, she also relies heavily on snail mail, e-mail, newspaper ads and phone calls. "(Facebook is) useful, but it's certainly not the only way. You'll fail if you only try that," she said. "It's foolish to think you're going to stick (an announcement) on Facebook and have a reunion. If you could do it like that, I'd do it like that and save a lot of money."

But when saving money is tantamount, some classes, including Ashley Bolton and the Chatham

High School Class of 1990, choose to forgo formalities in favor of casual meet-ups announced via FaceBook group pages.

"Cost has been an issue with at least my class," said the former class president, who along with a few other classmates organized a pay-as-you-go reunion, using primarily FaceBook to spread the word, which she realizes only targets about half of her class.

"Historically, it just seems like the 15- and

20-year (reunions) are when people have young kids and money is a concern."

Both kept Bolton, who now lives in Denver, from attending the very party she helped to throw.

"I just didn't have \$3,000 to spend to fly my family across the country," she said. "As I said to my class, I'm saving up for the 25th already."

Though a number of informal gatherings at the local watering hole never materialize, Bolton said her class's Nov. 27 party at Sona Thirteen in Morristown came together beautifully.

And how would she know? It was all over Facebook the next day.

"From the pictures and comments folks have posted on Facebook, it was a great success!" Bolton said. "I hear about 50 classmates showed up, which was about 25 percent of our class. Not too bad for an 'informal' reunion!"