

Alhambra High of the 40's and 50's

By
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*RKO Studios – 780 Gower Street
Hollywood, California*

It is gratifying to me to learn that as the theme for your 1947 annual you have chosen the same central idea as presented in “It’s a Wonderful Life”; that this is a wonderful life, indeed...and I am sure that, like these years you have spent at Alhambra City High School, you will always be able to say to yourself at all times: IT’S A WONDERFUL LIFE!

*Frank Capra
Director of It’s a Wonderful Life*

Frank Capra is one of Hollywood’s best known directors. He took time to write a letter to an editor of the Alhambra High School yearbook. Capra complimented her on the annual’s theme and provided a reminder that what makes life wonderful is touching others’ lives. The letter is in the front of the 1947 Alhambra High School yearbook.

And just as Capra’s George Bailey did not initially understand how many lives he would touch, you can not help but wonder if some of the people at Alhambra High School in the 1940’s and 1950’s did not realize how many lives they would ultimately touch.

Alhambra High during these decades was a special place. It would produce nationally acclaimed writers, comics, producers, and athletes.

Perhaps the funniest student to ever graduate from Alhambra High was Stan Freberg, class of ’44. Freberg performed his comedy routines on television shows such as *The Ed Sullivan Show* and *The Tonight Show*, took over for Jack Benny on CBS radio with his own zany show in the late 1950’s, and acted in the madcap comedy, *It’s a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World*.

On top of this Freberg wrote music, generally of a silly and satirical nature, authored best selling books such as *It Only Hurts When I Laugh*, and innovated new genres of advertising as a creative ad director. His start in entertainment came through voice acting with notables such as Mel Blanc at Warner Brothers and providing the voice of KTLA’s Cecil, the Seasick Sea Serpent.

Freberg’s gene pool drew from a Baptist minister father and a professional magician uncle. His irreverent humor got its start at Alhambra High School

where he was dubbed "Dr. Satire". Perhaps his most memorable prank was drawing a large crowd to McKay's drugstore as he threatened to jump off the fifth floor, only to be pulled off the roof by two men dressed in white, and then displaying a sign urging students to vote for him in upcoming student elections.

Arnold Shapiro graduated from Alhambra High in 1958. The ex-Moor attended UCLA and took a job with David Wolper Productions after his college graduation. From an early age Shapiro knew he wanted to be a free lance producer and writer of television documentaries.

He is best known for his 1978 Oscar and Emmy award winning documentary, *Scared Straight!* His other television productions include *Rescue 911*, hosted by William Shatner, and the CBS reality series, *Big Brother*. In the 1990's Shapiro produced the most watched non-news documentary special ever broadcast on American television, *Scared Silent: Exposing & Ending Child Abuse*, which was hosted by Oprah Winfrey.

During the 1940's and 50's Alhambra's High School supplied an impressive level of athletic talent to the local universities. There was a pipeline to the UCLA football program.

During the years from 1954 and 1960, Alhambra High sent Roger White, Bob Duncan, Dick Wallen, Bill Leeka, Harry Baldwin, and Dave Dabov to play at the collegiate level for the Bruins. This was an era when UCLA football won its lone national Championship in football and had the legendary coach Red Sanders. Dick Wallen was the only junior selected to the 1957 Associated Press All American Team.

Duane Allen also played at Alhambra High in the 1950's and played professionally for the Chicago Bears and Los Angeles Rams. As an adult, Allen also entertained with his pop band at various Alhambra school functions.

As I grew up on Novelda Road, Claude Miller was a neighbor. I knew Mr. Miller as an administrator at Alhambra High School. But earlier in his tenure at Alhambra High, Claude Miller gained significant acclaim coaching the varsity basketball team.

One of Miller's key players was an All CIF player named Bob Boyd. Boyd later came back to coach varsity basketball at Alhambra High in the late fifties and gained his greatest attention by coaching some of USC's most successful basketball teams in the late 1960's and 70's.

Perhaps Boyd's most memorable accomplishment was dealing UCLA its only two losses at Pauley Pavilion during the arena's first decade. Both victories were against John Wooden coached teams which ultimately won national championships.

Steve Kemp, my high school tennis coach, starred in basketball for Alhambra High School and graduated in 1956. Kemp followed in Coach Boyd's

footsteps by then lettering in basketball three years at USC and returning to coach varsity basketball and tennis at his high school alma mater.

Ron Bane and Ron Livingston played Alhambra basketball for Claude Miller and both started for UCLA basketball teams of the mid-1950's. Darrall Imhoff, Alhambra HS class of '56 and an excellent basketball player, started three years at Cal, played on the United States gold medal basketball team in the 1960 Olympics, and enjoyed a 12 year NBA career.

There are almost too many teachers in Alhambra High School's past to mention in this short article. But teachers like John Patrick, Elmore Shipman, and Elizabeth Luttrell made the school their career home.

Joe Saltzman graduated from Alhambra High in the 1950's. Saltzman would produce landmark news documentaries such as "Why Me?", the first nationally televised program on breast cancer, and became an award winning journalist. He also taught journalism at USC and would plant the seed of writing in my own mind through his Journalism 110 class. This past year he wrote in the *Los Angeles Times* a tribute to the recently deceased Alhambra High School journalism teacher, Ted Tajima. Saltzman said his experience as a student with Mr. T (Tajima's respectful nickname among students) "changed my life forever".

Frank Capra concludes his letter to the Alhambra High School student by quoting Clarence, George Bailey's guardian angel, "Strange, isn't it? Each man's life touches so many other lives and when he isn't around he leaves an awful hole". Capra goes on to say, "There are times in our lives, perhaps, that we may feel we are no more important than a digit in a census report. If and when that time comes, harken to Clarence's words."

Alhambra High during the post World War II era did a nice job of producing people who touched lives. Clarence is smiling.

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