



People & Places

Forty Years Ago: The Founding of the American School of Barcelona

By: **Ettie Zilber**

Director, American School of Barcelona, Spain

The foundation of new American schools outside the United States is a challenging and memorable endeavor. However, the establishment of an American school by Spanish nationals during Franco's reign, in 1962, was an act of vision, optimism and defiance.

The founding of ASB was the result of the vision of a medical doctor, Dr. Poal.

Dr. Poal developed a great admiration for the United States and American values, after spending time there at professional courses and conferences. Not a politician by profession nor by profile, he sought to fight a political battle in his own small way by introducing American language, culture, democratic teaching strategies and values to Barcelona. His first step was through the establishment of the North American



The founding of the American School of Barcelona by Spanish nationals during Franco's reign in 1962, was an act of "vision, optimism and defiance", according to Ettie Zilber, Director, as she reflected on her school's forty years of history.

Institute and, thereafter, by the founding of the American School, in which he enrolled his two young children.

The challenges and the champions of this historical event were recently celebrated by the school at a huge anniversary reunion which was attended by current and former parents, current and past Board members, staff, the first student (the founder's son),

his classmates and alumni from the subsequent 40 years. It was truly a memorable and emotional occasion.

The importance of researching, documenting and remembering the history of one's organization, or family, was emphasized by the Director in her dedication speech. "I personally believe that it is important for every individual and

every institution to be fully aware of its heritage and inheritance. These stories and transferred memories become part of the culture of the family or organization and, thus, become a bond that ties the group closer together; they are too valuable to lose."

During this project we realized just how difficult it is to document a history from memories alone. While memories are colorful, anecdotal and priceless, they are subject to many variables. It is important to complement and temper the anecdotes with documents. This was accomplished through the ASB Historical Preservation Project, which took almost two years of research and interviews.

The evening's celebration revolved around the screening of a video documentary, developed to record the history of the school's foundation to the present time. Interviews with veteran parents, who were involved in the original parent cohort and who bravely took the leap of faith 40 years ago, were intertwined with those of staff members and Alumni. The video included not only stories about the school, but also original footage of documentaries from global and local events in politics and culture. The hour long documentary held the attention of the audience because it balanced memories and photos about the school within the compelling context of parallel world events.

The theme of the evening was 'the four decades of ASB' and showed the foundation and highlights of the school's history within a global setting. The impressive decorations designed and crafted by our creative and energetic PTA displayed enlarged photos of the Beatles, Kennedy assassinations, war in Vietnam, death of Franco, the failed coup d'etat in Madrid, the introduction of the Euro, and continued past the horror of 9-11. Part of the decorations included the original advertisements from the Spanish press announcing the opening of enrollment for the school. These were found after searching the dusty archives of one of the reputable newspapers in Spain. Ironically, Franco appeared on the front page of that edition, as he was transported in his car through the streets of Barcelona—a surrealistic contrast to the opening of an American school. Even the recorded background music was chosen to reflect the popular songs of the 60s, 70s, 80s and 90s.

The energy, preparation and resources that are invested in such an event can become totally-consuming; however, the results are well worth the massive effort. Events such as these create an environment which impacts the school culture and develops strong school pride. In addition, we are now screening the pictorial history of the school on a computer in the lobby entrance so visitors and potential families can also learn about the history of the school. It was truly a festival of history and memories that sparked emotions, hugs, tears and long animated conversations. While not considered late by Spanish time, we had to encourage the stragglers to leave after midnight...and a wonderful time was had by all. 🌐

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