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Grads embrace challenge of a rapidly changing world

Class of '08 inherits war, globalization and high-tech toys to solve the problems

BY GEORGE BASLER • PRESS & SUN-BULLETIN • JUNE 22, 2008

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Peggy J. Wozniak's last year in high school was marked by change.

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The superintendent of the Binghamton City School District graduated in 1968 in the midst of an unpopular war, the civil rights and women's rights movements, the emergence of Japan as an economic power and technological developments (remember eight-track tapes?).

"It was a watershed year," she remembered. "I felt the huge responsibility of my generation to make a

OUR PANEL

High school seniors who participated in our panel discussion, and the university they plan to attend:

* Ellen Gleason

Binghamton High

Harvard University

Major: International affairs

* Elliott Cook

Chenango Forks

Clarkson University

Major: Interdisciplinary engineering and management

* Matt Asher

Union-Endicott

Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute

Major: Mechanical engineering



difference."

Change also marked Katharine Mead's last year in high school.

The Owego Free Academy senior is graduating in the midst of an unpopular war, a presidential primary campaign between a black man and a woman, the emergence of China and India as economic powers and technological developments, led by iPods and cell phones.

"Connected" is the word that defines her generation, Mead said.

* Katharine Mead
Owego Free Academy
Brown University
Major: Humanities

* Divine Sebuharara
Vestal
Buffalo State
Major: Education

* Preet Kahai
Vestal
Binghamton University
Major: Biology

"We're aware how big the world is, and how complicated that makes things."

Like the Class of 1968, the Class of 2008 that will graduate next weekend represents a generation on the cusp of major social, economic and political changes. Six students sat down last week for two panel discussions on what they think their class will face over the next 40 years.

Joining them were Wozniak and Town of Union board member Nancy LaBare, both members of the Class of 1968 who looked back on the events of four decades ago. The discussions explored many of the similarities and some differences between the two groups that sat in high school classrooms 40 years apart.

Technology: The big change

The unprecedented technological revolution is something the Class of 1968 never anticipated.

The Class of 2008, on the other hand, is defined by technology.

"We're the iPod generation" is how Preet Kahai, 17, a senior at Vestal High School, describes it.

The revolution has shaped the way his generation is entertained, receives information and processes information, Kahai said. "We have different needs and a shorter attention span. We want things done right away."

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Instantaneous communication is something her generation takes for granted and it's changed the way young people view the world, said Ellen Gleason, 18, a senior at Binghamton High School.

"We understand what happens in the rest of the world has such a great impact on what happens in the United States. It makes us want to become more involved," Gleason said.

Young people see the downside of technology as well.

There's so much information that "you don't know what you're going to be hit with next," said Elliott Cook, 17, a senior at Chenango Forks High School. While there's a wealth of information, it's not always consistent information, added Matt Asher, 17, a senior at Union-Endicott High School.

Wozniak sees the danger that technology could lead to social isolation. Author John Naisbitt has written of the need to balance "high technology" with "high touch," she said. She hopes young people keep that in mind.

Asher thinks they will. Personal, face-to-face interaction will remain extremely important, even in an age of technology. "You'll always need to shake someone's hand or hug someone," he said.

Globalization

In some ways, the world of the Class of 1968 was well-defined. There were two major superpowers: the United States and the Soviet Union.

That's changed now. The Soviet Union is history and the United States is part of an increasingly global economy.

That's the world the Class of 2008 will be living in, they said. They view this globalization as an opportunity, not a threat. They seem comfortable with it.

"If it's inevitable, how can you say it's a threat?" Mead asked rhetorically.

The United States can benefit greatly from trade with countries, including China and India, Asher said. He doesn't think the U.S. needs to be the world's policeman. "I don't know if we have to be the most powerful country in the world," he said.

Kahai foresees a world with a group of economic superpowers, not just one. Gleason anticipates the same thing. She doesn't think the United States is declining so much as other nations are rising economically and technologically.

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"Rather than fear that, we should embrace that. We should learn to work together with other nations," Gleason said.

Yes, that's an idealistic viewpoint, but she added: "Why not set a goal as high as you can and work for it? Then, if you fall short, at least you've tried."

Change and excitement

Students in the Class of 1968 couldn't avoid the political controversies of the time, Wozniak and LaBare said.

LaBare remembers draft cards being burned and demonstrations against the Vietnam War. Wozniak can still see members of her high school class in Buffalo being drafted if they didn't go to college.

Political activity is different with this generation, students said. Again, technology is driving the change. Rather than connecting through demonstrations, people connect and organize through the Internet, Cook said. Look at blogs, Asher added.

"Our generation is involved online," Mead said. She questions this sometimes. "It's not progress if everybody is sitting with a computer every day."

This election year has excited many young people because of the candidacies of Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama, the students said.

"This election year is a big, big deal. I know a lot of people who are registering and becoming very active," Gleason said.

Obama's candidacy strikes a deeply personal note with Divine Sebuharara, 18, a young black woman who is a senior at Vestal High School.

"I feel so many more opportunities are open to me because he's made it so," she said.

Obama could be someone this generation looks at the same way some young people in the 1960s viewed John F. Kennedy, Asher said.

Not all of the young people, however, were ready to commit to Obama. While the Democrat represents change and charisma, Republican candidate John McCain has good ideas too, Cook said. He has to look at both nominees before making a choice, he said.



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From comfort to concern

The Class of 1968 faced problems close to home. The Vietnam War dominated. Wozniak remembers feeling she needed to do something about it.

Forty years ago, 18-year-olds couldn't vote and had to find alternative ways to get their voices heard, LaBare said.

Members of the Class of 2008 see problems from a global perspective.

"What scares me much more than a nuclear war is a resource war," Cook said. As the world population increases, he foresees increasing conflicts over resources such as a water and oil, something he predicts will be the major challenge for his generation.

This generation grew up in the 1990s when it seemed like a comfortable time to live in the United States, Gleason said. Now, they're graduating at a time of recession or the threat of one, and political unrest throughout the world.

Gleason sees that as an advantage because it's leading young people to become proactive.

"We've seen how things can be so damaged so quickly, and that's spurred us to be involved," she said.

Cook is more uncertain. He wonders if his generation is going to deal with problems such as global warming.

The Class of 2008 has yet to prove itself, he said.

Look to the future

Wozniak thinks every generation can be stereotyped. The Class of 1968 was stereotyped as irresponsible and unpatriotic. The Class of 2008 is stereotyped as lazy and feeling a false sense of entitlement.

But her class deserves credit for shattering barriers for women and minorities, Wozniak said.

On the other hand, LaBare feels her generation didn't do as good a job as her parents' generation and is leaving serious problems for today's young people.

"There's a lot of work yet to do," she said.

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What that future will be is difficult to predict, students said.

"You don't know what emerging technologies there will be," Cook said. "You don't know if someone will solve the energy crisis by finding some other form of energy."

In a reassuring way, the Class of 2008 shares the hopefulness of previous generations. Asked if they were optimistic about the future, five of six students quickly said "optimistic." Cook called himself "pragmatic," saying realism must be mixed in with optimism.

From her perspective as a school superintendent, Wozniak sometimes feels optimistic, too. Conversations with students excite her about the future, she said.

"I hope if my generation has done anything, it's given birth to the next generation that will do an even better job of where we started," she said.

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tennispro9911 wrote:

Really? Why do people post comments that are plainly meant to insult others. littlehobo's comment had nothing to do with the article, and fishinnut's comment only had to do with a very small portion of baby boomer's activities and accomplishments. No generation is without its faults, but the baby boomer generation has done good things for this country. I thought this was a good story. It is extremely difficult to go into depth in the state of the world today, but this article attempts to do that through the eyes of high school graduates. High school graduates that are our future.

6/27/2008 11:44:20 PM

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fishinnut wrote:

It's funny, the very first paragraph is a quote from a baby boomer, and states "I felt the huge responsibility of my generation to make a difference" !! Well, I can't say for sure what Mrs. Wozniak has done for this generation and country, but for her peers and the rest of the people from the baby boomer generation, you have collectively done nothing. Nothing at all that should make you feel proud. You have molded a culture that has lost all regard for others, especially the ones who protect you(The

Military). The first person that pops in my mind from your generation is Hanoi Jane, who if you ask me should be in prison. Oh yeah, I forgot about another one of your namesakes, Mr John Kerry(Heinz), who should be in the same category as Benedict Arnold. One more that comes to mind, Mr. Murtha. By the way Murtha, how did that whole Haditha trial work out? Thats right, all charges DISMISSED!!! Your generation is the root of all the problems that these new graduates have to deal with.

6/22/2008 7:54:50 PM

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littlehobo wrote:

I would have said by looking at the picture that Wozniak graduated from high school in 1948

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