

# Introduction

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July 1, 2003 was a beautiful summer day – one of the first, after months of cold, wet weather. Less than two weeks earlier 262 seniors, representing the 116th senior class in Staples High School history, had graduated in the fieldhouse. That festive ceremony – the first in memory led by a student master of ceremonies – was also the first presided over by Dr. John Brady. Three months earlier he had been named principal, dropping “interim” from his title. The announcement was greeted with joy by every group having anything to do with Westport’s sprawling high school: staff, students, parents, even citizens with no direct connection to Staples beyond footing the education bill. In less than a year, since moving to the North Avenue campus from his post as deputy superintendent of schools at the Town School Office on Myrtle Avenue, Dr. Brady had brought new life – and laughter – to the 119-year-old school.

Now, underneath a pear tree on a patch of grass separating the rutted parking lot from the beige-brick complex, Dr. Brady joined a host of dignitaries for a low-key ceremony. Near a plaque commemorating John F. Kennedy’s famous “Ask not what your country can do for you...” quote – a gift from Staples’ Class of 1964 – several speakers made their own historical references, calling the high school “the jewel in the crown” of the Westport educational system. Then the principal, superintendent of schools Dr. Elliot Landon, first selectwoman Diane Goss Farrell, Board of Education chair Sandra Urist and 10 other educators, politicians, citizen-volunteers and construction company representatives turned over symbolic shovels of dirt. At a little before 5 p.m. on that sunny Tuesday, ground was broken for construction of a new building. Another major chapter in Staples High School’s long and fabled history had begun.

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Nearly a century and a quarter earlier, the first senior class graduated from Staples. That ceremony, in June of 1887, involved just six girls. In the decades that followed, a great deal has happened at, and to, Staples High School. The student body grew – slowly at first, then explosively to over 2,000. Despite the addition of ninth graders – who had attended Staples for the first 40 years, too – the population shrank to half its high. Today it is back on the rise.

The original red-brick building – a dream its founder, Horace Staples, finally saw fulfilled at age 82 – was for many years the envy of all Westport’s neighbors. After half a century, however, it became small and outmoded. A new unit was built, adjacent to the first on Riverside Avenue. Staples students went to war; the town grew, and soon even a second addition was inadequate.

In 1958 an entirely new Staples High School was built several miles from the first, in the woods of North Avenue. At nearly \$4 million, it was called extravagant, yet its campus-like layout of separate buildings created a wondrous sense of openness, innovation and

creativity. Within a few years, Staples was considered one of the finest schools in the entire country.

Thanks to a fortuitous choice of principal, an outstanding faculty, an empowered student body and a supportive community, Staples made it through the turbulent 1960s better than most educational institutions. The school weathered the New England weather less well, however. A decade later the nine different buildings were finally enclosed. New principals came, made their changes and their marks, then left. The Staples of the '80s and '90s was, physically and psychically, different than the Staples of the '60s and '70s – and, of course, the Staples of the 1930s, 1910s and 1890s.

And yet, in many ways, it was not so different at all. A high school is much more than bricks and hallways, classrooms and gyms. A high school is ultimately defined by what goes on in those classrooms and halls, and in that sense the Staples of 2005 – the year the fifth new building of that name was constructed – is intimately related to the Staples of 1884.

From the moment it opened its doors, the school has emphasized academic excellence. It has challenged its best and brightest students in a way too few high schools – or even colleges and universities – have done. It has taken care of its other students too, providing academic and career opportunities that enable them to succeed and contribute to their society and world. It has cherished the arts as strongly as literature, history, science and math, nurturing the souls as well as the minds of dozens of generations of students. And it has done all this while simultaneously reflecting the larger Westport community of which it is an integral part – often, in fact, leading it.

How has Staples done all this? The answer is as simple as one word: “People.” From the day of its dedication, the school has been blessed with countless individuals who have done what the very best educators do: care. Principals, administrators, teachers and paraprofessionals; librarians, secretaries, nurses, coaches and custodians; parents and students – for 120 years, the halls of Staples have been filled with men and women, boys and girls, who cared deeply about their hometown high school with the odd-sounding name.

I am one of those people: a native Westporter who by luck or good fortune happened to grow up a few hundred yards from the school; who played on its fields as a child, was molded by it as a teenager, and returned there to work as an adult. Yet this book is not my story. It is the tale of countless Westporters who, for a longer span of time than any human now alive, have contributed their own unique talents, energy and love to make the sum of Staples High School far larger than their own individual parts.

When the first shovelful of ground was turned on July 1, 2003, no one knew what lay ahead for the newest incarnation of Staples High School. Predicting the future is a fool's task at best. But if the past 120 years is any guide, then the future looks spectacularly bright. Twelve decades of history must count for something.

Horace Staples would feel very proud indeed.