



**Harry F. Thernal**

**Monday, September 29, 2008**

## **Restoration of P.S. school is gratifying**

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Put Oct. 16 on your calendar. That's the evening P.S. du Pont School will be rededicated, 73 years after construction was completed. The massive brick edifice with its familiar spire in north Wilmington may look just as beautiful from the outside as when it opened in 1935, but after more than a year and \$44 million of transformation, it has become as modern and flexible as any new school being built in Delaware these days.

At 7 p.m. on that Thursday night, the Brandywine School District is inviting students, staff, parents, alumni/ae and the community to see how this building on the National Register of Historic Places has been transformed. Of course I have a special fondness for my high school, which I entered when the building wasn't even a decade old. Designed by architect E. William Morris, built during the Depression with a total cost of \$1.9 million, it was named after industrialist and philanthropist Pierre Samuel du Pont, who didn't seek the naming honors and never visited it after the school's dedication.

It seemed giant then, and it still does, with 230,000 square feet (more than five acres) of interior space. After it was converted into an elementary school in 1978, I feared its high school tradition would be forgotten. Sure enough, an uncaring principal tried to trash records, gave away trophies and erased all of those memories. Luckily a P.S. teacher, Harry Fox, who had also graduated from the high school, and his fifth-grade students rescued from the hands of custodians memorabilia about to be discarded. And now John Read, the construction project manager, has led a similar effort to preserve that history, saving records found in an office safe, setting aside a room in the restored school for P.S. archives. He and principal Lincoln Hohler are hoping anyone who has P.S. memorabilia will donate it to this room.

It's hard for me to separate out for praise the contributions of Read, ABHA Architects; Bancroft Construction Co, the general contractors; and the many individual subcontractors and craftsmen. This had become a building where the roof leaked, the boilers didn't work and hundreds of other faults had accumulated over the years. A tour of the school with Read is a gratifying experience as he explains how original architectural features were kept and refurbished, how modern mechanical systems were unobtrusively installed, how just about every construction detail is guaranteed a lifespan of 25 or 30 years.

Read has been directing the district's massive modernization and building projects for five years. He is a Woodstown, N. J., father of two and Gettysburg College graduate. He came to the Brandywine District after 10 years with the Delaware River and Bay Authority. He has now moved on to the construction of a new Lancashire School, modernizing Springer Middle School and building a new Brandywood School on the site of the soon-to-be-demolished Hanby School.

If you go to the dedication, marvel at the beautifully restored terrazzo and hardwood floors, uncovered skylights, the computer-guided lighting, temperature, humidity and communication systems; the comfortable cafeteria, amenities in the auditorium. P.S. now has 650 elementary school students and another 150 early education youngsters in their own school within a school. Next fall P.S. will become a middle school for grades 6 through 8, and will probably attract 900 students as parents learn about its assets. Little reconfiguration will be needed for that changeover.

The reconstruction also included the free-standing swimming pool building, open to the community since 1972. Carved in Latin over the entrance to the refurbished larger of two gyms is "Mens sana in corpore sano," a healthy mind in a healthy body, an ideal toward which all schools should strive.

**Harry Themal has been writing for The News Journal since 1959.**