

# BOOK REVIEW



## ***The Schenley Experiment: A Social History of Pittsburgh's First Public High School***

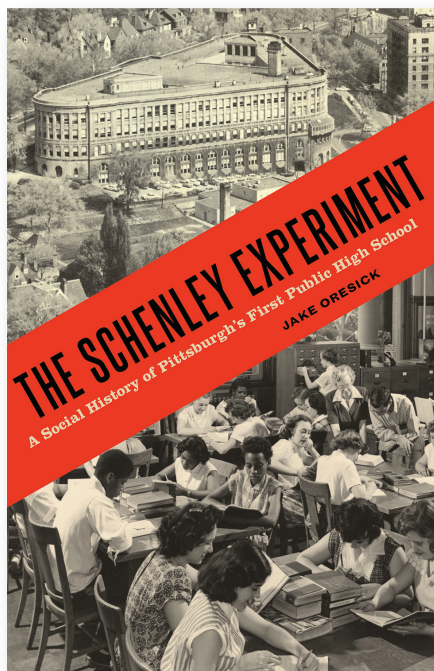
By Jake Oresick

Penn State University Press, 2017

240 pp., 42 b&w illus., 4 maps

Paperback, \$19.95

Reviewed by Lu Donnelly




While Jake Oresick is hardly an unbiased observer, as this 2001 graduate of Schenley High School illustrated in his 2008 article titled “Why We Fight for Schenley,” he nonetheless has managed to present a well-balanced and well-written study of the school in Pittsburgh’s Oakland neighborhood. The author analyses Schenley High School as a social incubator for class, race, and ethnicity.

Oresick, a Pittsburgh lawyer, points out the social benefit to students of blending both vocational and academic curricula as well as mixing races and economic classes. The author interviewed 150 alumnae, teachers, and administrators and skillfully weaves their personal testimonies into the narrative. He points to a special school spirit at Schenley illustrated during pep rallies, musicals, and even the lunch hour when he characterizes the school as “A place where people from different neighborhoods, religious backgrounds, economic strata, and, in many cases, different continents, live and learn and figure out life together.” From 1889 to 2011, Schenley’s red and black school colors and the school motto “Enter to Learn, Go Forth to Serve” represented the outward manifestation of this spirit.

The author shows that architect Edward Stotz’s design for the new 1916 Schenley High School building was at least the third million-dollar high school building in the United States; two previous schools, one in Philadelphia and another in Jersey City cost as much. Inside the school’s 468-foot limestone isosceles triangle,

Schenley boasted two gymnasias and wide, light-filled corridors lined with reproductions of famous art. The performances in the 1,600-seat auditorium not only attracted enthusiastic parents, but large city-wide audiences, and in some cases national celebrities like Marian Anderson and Eleanor Roosevelt. Oresick lists five pages of eminent graduates that includes judges and sports stars, artists like Andy Warhol and local celebrities like Bob Prince. Three nationally famous jazz greats—Earl “Fatha” Hines, Ray Brown, and Walt Harper—are also alumni.

One of the most interesting sections of the book is Oresick’s analysis of how Schenley came to be closed. While Pittsburghers read episodic newspaper reports as events unfolded, the book presents the issues clearly and chronologically in Chapter 10. Oresick doesn’t gloss over Pittsburgh’s integration and segregation history, interviewing African Americans who were taunted for “acting white” and other former students who actually enjoyed high school.

The book includes a brief general history of all of the city’s high schools from 1855 to today. With extensive footnotes and appendices chronicling everything from notable alumni to athletic accomplishments and school plays, *The Schenley Experiment* is an excellent addition to every local researcher’s bookshelf. 

<sup>1</sup> Jake Oresick, “Why We Fight For Schenley,” *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, June 25, 2008.

# LEGACIES

By Kaitlyn Loy,  
Senior Development Associate

**Jack Sheehan**  
Member since: 2007

There are more than 57 reasons to visit and volunteer at the History Center, and Jack Sheehan is one of them. With a passion for storytelling, this Vietnam War veteran is bringing to life the History Center's exhibitions and artifacts and sharing Pittsburgh's incredible history in a singular way.

After a meaningful visit to the *Soul Soldiers: African Americans and the Vietnam Era* exhibition at the History Center 12 years ago, Jack was inspired to enlist in the ranks as a volunteer. He enrolled in a docent training class, and it wasn't long before he was leading tours of his own.

Since then, Jack has worked with our affiliate museums, created lectures on Western Pennsylvania history through the Ambassador Program, and promoted the History Center at outreach events. As History Center Volunteer Coordinator Ellen DeNinno shares, "He is a dream volunteer."

Today, Jack's legacy is giving back to the city he loves. After achieving an incredible 4,600 hours of service to the History Center and the Fort Pitt Museum, Jack excitedly shares that the opportunity to work with visitors of all ages, from preschoolers, to college level students, to tour groups from all over the world, is what keeps him inspired. He adds, "I've learned from every one of them, probably more than they have learned from me."

When asked what the secret is to being a great volunteer, Jack is apt to quote Pittsburgh native and long-time History Center supporter, David McCullough: "In *The American Spirit*,



Jack Sheehan in front of the Heinz Hitch in the Great Hall.

Photo by Sarah Reck.

McCullough writes that 'attitudes aren't taught, they're caught. If the teacher has enthusiasm for the subject at hand, the student catches that, be it in second grade or graduate school.... Show them what you love.'"

Jack adds, "What keeps me coming back is the atmosphere, the encouragement and helpfulness of the staff, the comradery of the fellow docents, the sheer fun of watching visitors discover what they have been a part of, and the discovery that this is so much more than memorizing dates and names as 'history' was taught in school."

When asked to share a memorable volunteer experience, Jack relates a powerful visitor moment: "I was working with a group of Alzheimer's patients, all in wheelchairs. Our last stop was the *Heinz* exhibit. As we entered the exhibit, one of the visitors started crying. I had never had this happen before, so I quickly knelt down and asked if anything was wrong.

Was there anything I could do? She looked at me and tearfully said, 'My husband worked for Heinz for 40 years.'"

While it's true that the History Center preserves history through its artifacts, Jack impresses that docents are the "story tellers," who are helping to make history come alive for our visitors, so that when they leave, they feel inspired to contribute to the community in their own way. This is why Jack steadfastly supports the History Center with an annual gift of membership: a desire to make an impact in the lives of each one of our visitors. 🌟

**The History Center deeply appreciates the long-time support of Jack and all of our individual contributors, who make the History Center's work possible. To learn more about giving opportunities, please contact Tonia Rose, VP Museum & Development at [TMRose@heinzhistorycenter.org](mailto:TMRose@heinzhistorycenter.org).**