Meet the Bronx Boys

By BARBARA ISENBERG

Fifteen New York City kids, the subject of a lauded documentary, have stayed in touch for more than 65 years.

IT’S ONE OF LIFE’S most painful and predictable rituals: leaving friends behind after graduation, marriage or retirement. But for 15 men who grew up together in the Bronx in the 1930s and ’40s, today’s most significant friendships began in childhood. Despite being scattered all over the country, this clutch of school chums has managed to keep in touch for more than six decades, since starting at New...
York City’s public school (P.S.) 80. The friends’ story, which was recently turned into a documentary, reveals a gentler era, when the phrase “friends forever” had meaning.

As they recall schoollboy crushes, ice cream trucks and stickball, their reminiscences also conjure up a safer, simpler world. Maybe that’s why what began as a video scrapbook of their joint 70th birthday celebration wound up as an award-winning film, The Bronx Boys, which has appeared on Cinemax, at a few film festivals and began appearing on PBS stations this fall. Carl Reiner is the host of the film, which was edited and directed by Benjamin Herschleder, a filmmaker in his 30s. “They have something special, these 15 guys,” Herschleder says. Born in 1931 or 1932, the Bronx Boys attended P.S. 80, after which most went to the Bronx’s DeWitt Clinton High School and local colleges. Many entered the Army at the same time and were in basic training together at Fort Dix, N.J. “We still hug when we see each other, and I’m sure people look at us and say, ‘What are those old guys doing?’” says Joe Greenberg, a retired engineer in Rockville, Md. “Joey? Howie? George? What kind of names are these? We were a bunch of buddies, and as we got older, we stayed a bunch of buddies.”

At the group’s core is the lifetime friendship of business partners George Shapiro and Howard West, who still work together as camp lifeguards in the Poconos and then in 1955 started in the mail room at New York City’s William Morris Agency. Since 1974, they’ve been partners in Shapiro-West Associates, a firm based in Beverly Hills, Calif., that produces films and TV shows and has managed such performers as Reiner, Jerry Seinfeld and the late Andy Kaufman.

Others from the old gang have had a variety of careers, selling everything from bricks and lumber to designer labels and maye even pictures. Some still live in New York City, and the rest can be found from Boca Raton, Fla., to Malibu, Calif. They always find one another. When marketing executive Joel Corder went to Los Angeles with 20th Century Fox in 1972, Shapiro saw an ad about the move in Variety and called Corder that night. Ten of the guys were ushered at the wedding of Barbara Topping and Sam Lewis in 1951 but lost touch until Greenberg found teacher Lewis on the Internet a few years ago.

Friends since first grade—except for latecomer West, who arrived in third grade when his family moved from another Bronx neighborhood—they reflect a time when the kids you played with at 6 were often still your classmates at 16. Born to lower-middle-class Jewish parents, many of whom were immigrants who wanted something better for their children, the Bronx Boys have let neither geography nor time interfere as, one by one, they moved away from the old neighborhood.

What they left behind were the five- and six-story apartment houses that still flank the Bronx’s Moshulu Parkway, as do a sprawling park and P.S. 80. In the ’30s cars were few, and the street was as much a playground as were the park and schoolyard. “For stickball, we’d break off broom handles, then sew covers as bases,” recalls Leonard (Lenny) Lauren, today a consultant to his younger brother, fashion icon Ralph Lauren. “The foul lines were the cars on both sides of the street.”

They’d meet in the schoolyard, candy stores, pool halls and restaurants. “We weren’t really a gang,” says Greenberg. “We didn’t all go at the same time to the same places. You went down to the schoolyard, and three other guys were there. The next day, there were five different guys.”

Many of their wives too are from the neighborhood. Only two of the 15 boys have been divorced, including Shapiro, who says that aside from widowers who remarried, the rest remain wedded to the women they courted decades ago. West has been married for 43 years to his wife Marlene, a Bronx girl. Shapiro’s current wife, Diane Burnett-Shapiro, is another New Yorker. The secret? Familiarity. “After I told Jerry [Seinfeld] that the more common ground you have, the better chance of a successful marriage,” says Shapiro, “he dubbed that the Shapiro law of common culture.”

What West calls “a split-

disagreeing loudly over foul calls. Here, though, a player score was checked by both sides.

Shapiro says The Bronx Boys started as “a record for our kids and grandkids to show them who we were, where we came from and what we valued.” But when Shapiro’s client—and uncle—Reiner heard about it, “he said he had to come,” says Shapiro. “They gave him a mike and he spontaneously interviewed everyone.” Becoming boys again as they describe their first kisses, crushes on schoolteachers and schoolyard games, they vividly retold stories. Greenberg took apart a TV set so it would fit through a small doorway and then reassembled it on the other side. As the film shows, these men have put together what amounts to an informal extended family, available in good times and bad. When Shapiro and West were in New York City last spring for Seinfeld’s 50th birthday, they hiked a car and driver, loaded up on deli goodies and went to visit the ailing Liss in the Bronx’s Riversidedale section. Liss died in May, and the run to the cabaret is dedicated to “the life and laughter of Elliott Liss.”

Much as the boys came up with some of the money a few years ago for Los Angeles—based actor and screenwriter John Herman (Heidy) Shaner to produce his new play, so they rallied this time to contribute money toward a New York City playground in Liss’s name.

The West Coast contingent lunches together every few months, and on the East Coast, many live in the group’s 70th reunion. Mixes like the boys came up

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Looking Back

The Bronx Boys pose with P.S. 80 T-shirts, completed with their names, at a 2001 reunion in L.A. hosted by West, left, with Reiner and Shapiro.


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