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Supervisor spent his school years on the run

On June 13, El Cerrito High School will be torn down to make way for a new school. It's the end of an era but not the end of El Cerrito High's story. Today's students and parents are busy collecting artifacts and interviews to preserve the high school's 60-plus years of history.

The Journal also wants to honor that history and through the rest of the school year will present the stories of many of those who left their mark on El Cerrito High, written by El Cerrito High student David Ball, editor in chief of the school newspaper.

THE BOOMING voice of math teacher Sandy Berman echoed through the trees and around the track, announcing the entrance of John Gioia. No, this was not a political event, something Gioia has since grown accustomed to. This was the Big Race.

Friends and fans filled the stands of El Cerrito High School chanting, "Gioia (pronounced Joy-ya), Go-a," as he raced his competitors around the track in the one-mile event.

Gioia is now a Contra Costa County supervisor. Between running track at El Cerrito High School and running for political office, he earned a bachelor's degree in political science and a law degree from UC Berkeley.

Gioia attended El Cerrito High when it was a high school only for 10th through 12th grade. As one of more than 300 students in the class of 1975, Gioia made a name for himself. But it wasn't as class president or vice president -- he was voted the Most Talkative student in the senior class.

Talking didn't stop Gioia from excelling in school. "I was pretty academically oriented. I enjoyed history and government classes the most, but I had great teachers all around. There were a lot of great classes and I always worked hard. I wanted to go to Cal," Gioia remembers.

While Gioia enjoyed the breadth of his education at El Cerrito, the activity that left a lasting impression on him was track. "I did well academically, but by far the thing I remember most was my time in athletics," Gioia reminisced. "It was a great experience."

With cross-country in the fall and track in the spring, Gioia spent almost all of his afternoons as a high school student running. With the memorable sounds of Oakland Athletics announcer Bill King blaring from the radio that the runners would bring to practice, the athletes ran to the cheers of the A's three straight World Series titles from 1972-1974.

"It was a great group of athletes, and we had great camaraderie. A lot was expected of you, but track taught a lot of discipline. It was a great way to spend the after-school hours."

Gioia still remains in the El Cerrito High record books for his mile time of four minutes and 45 seconds as a sophomore, which ranks in the top five for sophomores in school history. His fastest time ever came as a senior when he ran the mile in four minutes and 32 seconds.

Recalling why he got into politics, the supervisor says, "My father (who taught at Kennedy High School in Richmond) was my inspiration. He used to have guest speakers in his classes: journalists, politicians, and businesspeople. I came to hear them. I got exposed to local politics through my father and developed an interest that way."

The first political campaign Gioia worked on was for Tom Powers in 1978. Powers was running for county supervisor. Several years earlier, Gioia had listened to Powers speak to his dad's class, now he was in charge of polling the voters for Powers' campaign. Powers won the election and Gioia was hired to work for him part time. However Gioia didn't follow this opportunity and start his own career in politics, instead he began to practice law.

It wasn't until 1998, when Gioia was elected to the Contra Costa County Board of Supervisors, (the same position he had helped Tom Powers win) that he went into politics full time.

Firmly implanted in the present, Gioia is more than happy with his job as a supervisor and the difference he is able to make. He sees no reason to leave Bay Area politics and hopes in the future to help unite local politics so that different groups and cities can start working together.

Gioia, 47, and his wife, Jennifer Peck, live in Richmond with their son Christopher, a seventh-grader, and their 8-month-old daughter, Emilia.

Thirty years after graduating, Gioia still returns to the El Cerrito High track. Only, this time, he is the one with the stopwatch, and his 12-year-old son, Chris, is the one racing around the track, leaving his old man in the dust.

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