

Book review

Alec Klein
A Class Apart
Prodigies, Pressure, and Passion
Inside One of America's Best High
Schools [Peter Stuyvesant H.S.]

Peter Stuyvesant has been in Manhattan since the high school's inception.

Journalist Alec Klein, Stuyvesant Class of 1985 (and author of this 2007 book) studied original documents from the period 1904-1924, and described how **Stuy** re-invented itself even before the first World War.

Stuy had its beginnings on East Twenty-third Street in **1904**---a time when only seven percent of teen-agers graduated from any high school---as a **manual-training school** preparing students for the new industrial and commercial work-force. " To compete against a German army of skilled workmen...directed by captains of industry educated in the matchless Prussian schools [before the first World War], " according to a dean at NYU.

For many New York City students in 1904, English was the second language. Seventy percent had immigrant fathers not born in the USA. Many Stuyvesant teen-age boys---in the years before **1920**---lived in tenements on the so-called Lower East Side.

An early Stuy yearbook supported the view that " schools prepare hundreds for life while preparing a few for college."

By 1907, the school had moved into a brand-new building at 345 East Fifteenth Street. The long process of re-invention followed by re-invention followed by re-invention was getting under way. This 1907 building might be considered the first of many re-inventions of Stuyvesant.

After the first World War, Stuyvesant decided it was time to **re-invent** again : admission to Stuyvesant was restricted " to those with high academic records in elementary school. "

An entrance exam was added in 1934. A letter of recommendation became the ticket of admission to the exam but only for students whose elementary-school grade average was above 77.

Another **re-invention** took place in the late 1960s : Girls were admitted to Peter Stuyvesant High School. The assumption was made---correctly---that incoming girls would be socially and physically more mature than incoming boys of the same age---usually 14 or 13 but sometimes 12.

This third **re-invention** culminated during several years of social change (1967--1969) when---for example---Josef Stalin's daughter defected to the West. Now Peter Stuyvesant became a " co-educational " high school which meant more competition for admission among teen-age males in New York.

A fourth **re-invention** took place during the seven-year period 1986-1992, at 345 Chambers Street on the West Side, close to the south end of Manhattan---South Ferry, etc. A landfill was built in the mouth of the West (Hudson) River, with packed earth excavated nearby to make space for the foundation of a World Trade Center.

At 345 Chambers Street, Peter Stuyvesant H.S. came into possession of a new building which cost roundly \$ 150,000,000, a sum unusually large for one school in those years. Ten stories high, Stuyvesant became like a mythical " city on a hill. "

Coincidentally, Stuyvesant had become the unchallenged pinnacle among academic high schools in New York City. It was now " the first choice " among students who took the annual examination (for admission to several so-called exam schools) in Grade 8 at testing centers around the city.

A more recent **re-invention**---one which did not fire up the imagination of this book's author, Alec Klein, from Washington D.C.---did make a difference to residents of New York. On **September 11, 2001**, Stuyvesant began its fifth **re-invention** along with the rise of Mayor Rudy Giuliani---resulting from the unexpected airborne attack on the World Trade Center's upper floors---at a time and on a day of the week when Stuyvesant students were inside their education tower.

The newest Peter Stuyvesant became not a victim but a heroic-high-school against all odds---in close proximity to Ground Zero that was to become hallowed shrine. The mystique rapidly traveled the four blocks to Stuyvesant High School, on

the heels of a dust cloud from Ground Zero that shrouded the school-house on the hill.

An evacuation---and then a temporary relocation of classes to Brooklyn Technical High School---followed..

Among Stuyvesant people, the response to 9/11 was rapid and awesome. In less than one month---before classes resumed in the riverfront building---there appeared a surprise creation-in-print, 24 pages long, in "full color," about the hero school.

With assists from parents and professional journalists at *The New York Times*, Arthur Ochs Sulzberger, publisher---born February 5, 1926---consented to distribution of this creation in close to million copies (the best estimate is **830,000**) as an insert in that newspaper, complete with stunning color photography and persuasive students' writing.

The city-wide distribution took place on November 20th.

Two other Manhattan high schools even closer to Ground Zero reaped the whirlwind but there was hardly any publicity. The difference was like night and day---with only Stuyvesant in the strong light of *The New York Times*.

Credit for this re-invention and the previous re-inventions goes to a large group that includes " friends of the school," alumni, parents, guidance counselors, teachers, staff, administrators and students.

A surmise : Will the next re-invention turn out to be Fort Stuyvesant, in keeping with a higher level of security for all neighbors of the World Trade Center ? Will the towering Peter Stuyvesant High School find itself inside a WTC high-security zone?

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