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Story URL: <http://news.medill.northwestern.edu/chicago/news.aspx?id=227250>

Story Retrieval Date: 2/10/2015 11:35:36 AM CST



Bill Healy/WBEZ

A photo from Bill Healy's collection showing stacked chairs at Parkman Elementary School in Fuller Park. Parkman was one of the closed CPS schools, and was the only school that granted Healy access.

Photo collection displays shuttered CPS schools

by EMILY WEINSTEIN

Jan 29, 2014

Controversy about shuttered Chicago Public Schools is far from over.

Photographer Bill Healy is doing his part to keep the issue alive with a photo collection that documents the 50 school closings that rocked CPS in 2013. His collection will be featured Thursday at IPaintMyMind gallery in Logan Square.

"I wanted you to be able to look at them, and each photo explicitly say to you 'school closed,'" said Healy, a photographer and audio producer at WBEZ who spent the summer of 2013 photographing the shuttered schools that displaced more than 12,000 students.

CPS voted in May 2013 to close 49 elementary schools and one high school, leading to the largest single round of school closings in recent American history.

Healy worked closely with editor, Cate Cahan and mentor, WBEZ education reporter, Linda Lutton, to come up with a polished photo essay that would tell the tale of the closed buildings. Titled "Once a School," the exhibit featured selections from more than 3,000 photos.

Healy said Lutton has been a huge influence on his work, and the school closings are an issue that has remained important to her. Lutton, he said, wants to keep school closings in discussion "so that the issue doesn't just fade away."

Gallery owner Evan LaRuffa immediately signed on to feature the collection.

"My mom is a recently retired CPS teacher, and I went to public schools here my whole life," owner Evan LaRuffa said when talking about his interest in the project.

Healy visited each school on the list of closings. He was turned away time after time.

"When I brought back the first round of photos, Linda was like, 'No, you've got to get into the schools,'" Healy said.

Instead of calling CPS headquarters, Healy went straight to the source and asked the principals and "transition coordinators" directly if he could photograph their schools. All but one said "No."

"Some were like, 'You've got to get out of here now.' Others were sympathetic and understood but wouldn't let us," he said.

After about 20 school visits, Healy got a surprising "Yes" from the principal of Parkman Elementary School in Fuller Park.

"I really admire her courage," Healy said about Parkman's principal's decision.

Reflecting on the photos, Healy thinks it's cool only one school was photographed on the inside.

"It's this one school, but it's kind of representative of all the schools ..."

Healy said parts of the experience were sad and at times intimidating, but it was exciting to explore neighborhoods he called "hidden pockets."

"I talked to people hanging out in the neighborhoods around the shuttered schools," Healy said. "The way I tried to keep from being intimidated was just by talking to people, just being human. Everyone had some sort of story."

Healy's photo exhibit will be featured from 7-10 p.m. Thursday at IPaintMyMind Gallery in the Green Exchange Building, 2545 W. Diversey Ave., Suite 255.



Emily Weinstein/MEDILL

Photographer Bill Healy and gallery owner Evan LaRuffa set up Healy's photo collection "Once a School" at IPaintMyMind Gallery in Logan Square. The exhibition will be open to the public from 7-10 p.m. Thursday.