



# How a Marine Corps veteran made KISSStory

## The Legend of the Laurent: Former principal leaves lasting legacy

BY MARDI SUHS  
CADILLAC NEWS

**CADILLAC** — John E. Laurent, legendary for the role he played in bringing the rock band KISS to Cadillac in 1975, passed away on Aug. 10 at his home in Cadillac. He was 86.

No one was more surprised at becoming a '70s pop culture icon than Laurent, the Cadillac High School principal from 1969 to 1987.

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In October of 2015, John Laurent helped celebrate the 40th anniversary of the KISS Homecoming at Cadillac High School by posing with the KISS tribute band Mr. Speed.

His motive for agreeing to the visit was his desire to unite the student body. In the 1970s, cultural upheaval was dividing the students. In addition, CHS students attended in split sessions.

"You had literally two schools," said Jim Neff, the retired teacher and assistant football coach who started playing KISS music in the locker room and invited them to homecoming. "Some went to school mornings, others in the afternoon. There was no lunch. It was a struggle getting the kids pointed in the same direction."

"I have been trying to bring the student body together for a couple of

years," Laurent said after the KISS visit. "And KISS did that in one day."

Yet Laurent didn't consider the KISS event his greatest achievement at CHS.

### Veterans Day assembly

In a 2013 Cadillac News interview, Laurent was asked about his CHS administrative career.

"I am the one who started the veterans assembly," he said. "I suggested this to the senior class officers ... I told them it takes a lot of hard work to put together because it's all done in silence ... and it hasn't changed much over the years."

The first assembly took place on Nov. 11, 1969.

"KISS was important," said Tom Jobson, former vice principal. "It was a unique thing to approve in this community at the time. And it was a huge event that Dave Brines and Jim Neff put together. And John was the driving force to push it through the administration and the board of education. But there is one thing even more important than KISS — the Veterans Day assembly. He was responsible for it and it is a tradition that continues."

Jobson moved here in 1971 and witnessed the third annual assembly.

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# KISS: Laurent didn't consider the KISS event his greatest achievement at CHS

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"Awe, that's what I felt," he said. "To have all of our students dressed up in solemn respect, the pure silence ... this was impressive because it portrayed the dignity that the students had without knowing anyone who served, honoring their memory and the things they did for this country."

"You always hear about John and KISS, but the Veterans Day assembly is his best achievement," agreed Neff. "During that whole era of political unrest, he got the entire student body to buy into it. It was interesting to watch the freshman come in, not knowing what was going on. And when they were seniors taking the responsibility to run that whole event by themselves and proud to be involved."

"I was surprised when I came here to see the kids all dressed up, lining the gym with flashlight candles," said former CAPS Superintendent Fred Carroll. "It was very impressive to see kids conduct themselves that way. And they gained a lot of respect for the United States, for the veterans and civil servants."

Honoring our veterans was important for Laurent, a Marine Corps veteran who retired as a lieutenant colonel in the reserves. His eight surviving brothers (Leland was killed in a car crash in 1930) all served in the armed forces from World War II through Korea. His brother, Doug, was killed in action in Korea in 1952.

"All of my brothers that came back rarely would say

anything about their experiences," Laurent said. "But my brother, Jim, told me about the German counter-attack in the Battle of the Bulge, they were behind the German lines for eight days."

## The Legend of the Laurent

As the 2013 interview continued, he delayed mention of his KISS legacy for another memory, the "Legend of the Laurent." Yes, he and his seven brothers were popular with the ladies.

"We were all good at sports, all good athletes, and we all were kind of devils," he said. "When we were young, we didn't have a dad and we ran pretty free. All the girls wanted a Laurent."

## Laurent childhood

Jack Dillon grew up across the street from the Laurent family and is still best friends with John's surviving brother Richard, 84. And just last week, Dillon greeted John and his wife Joyce at a Cadillac High School class reunion. "I just shook hands with him at the reunion," Dillon said. "I've known him all my life. There were nine boys and one girl in that family and nobody lived to be 50 years of age."

Laurent's longevity was always a source of surprise for him.

"Nobody lived to be old in our family," Laurent once said. "They just didn't live very long."

After his father died in 1935, his mom ran the fam-

ily dry cleaning business. The sons that didn't leave for college later took over.

"Back then, you did what you had to do," Dillon said. "The family didn't lack for anything, and we all had a wonderful time growing up in Cadillac."

## Lincoln School

"I think his biggest accomplishment was Lincoln School," said Dillon. "He turned that school around. When Fred Carroll was the superintendent and before John retired, Carroll told him he could pick his next school. Laurent picked Lincoln. And at that time, Lincoln had a reputation and people called it 'stinkin Lincoln.'"

"John went into Lincoln and he talked to the kids and called it 'thinking Lincoln,'" Carroll said. "So the kids had the idea that they were smart. He was very good about making that change."

"I was a teacher at Lincoln and worked for him for nine years," said Bob Swiger, whose wife, Kathy Ziska, is Laurent's niece. "He wanted to build Lincoln up, and boy did he ever. He had spelling and math bees with other schools, he started a choir and a school song, he distributed newsletters all around town. The guy was phenomenal. He promoted it. And you wouldn't believe, when we got a school of choice, parents wanted to send their kids to Lincoln. He was a super guy and he will be greatly missed. The out-pouring on social (media) has been incredible."



COURTESY PHOTO

John Laurent was a natural athlete and was highly competitive. He loved to play golf and bridge.

## KISSStory

KISS fans began posting condolences for John Laurent when they discovered the news of his death over the weekend.

"With heavy hearts, we must share that John Laurent passed away yesterday," posted Neff on the KissCadillac website. "John was the Cadillac High School principal in 1975 when KISS came to Cadillac. He was instrumental in the decision making that led to the visit and became a legendary figure in the continuing story over the years."

"I am responsible for bringing KISS to Cadillac," Laurent said in the 2013 interview. "It was the most hectic week at CHS. I didn't even know who KISS was when Jim Neff asked me

about it ... I got permission from Superintendent Bill Smith. Jim had gone to their concerts and made contact with KISS. It turned out to be a wonderful week ... I was expecting the worst and hoping for the best. It turned out to be a wonderful week. And two of the four KISS members were school teachers."

No one involved could have known that the KISS Cadillac visit would make music history.

"I've been surprised every step along the way," Neff said. "The three key people were Dave Brines, Bill Smith, and John Laurent. If he had said no, we wouldn't have been able to do this. Looking back, I was a young teacher and for John, a rough-tough Marine, to get

on board, to say this looks like a lot of fun, I'm still amazed."

On Monday morning, Neff talked to Laurent's son, Dave, who mentioned that his dad was talking about the KISS story "right up until the end."

"The story continues," Neff said. "And it affects people all over the world. John is an integral part of that whole story."

"I am forever grateful for people like John Laurent," posted former student Dave Anderson on social media. "Thank you for loving kids. Our lives are forever changed because of friends like you."

*Quotes from John Laurent were taken from a 2013 Cadillac News interview.*

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