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Dunlevy: Before Westmount High, Kamala Harris went to FACE

Until now, the generally accepted storyline was that VP-elect Harris studied at primary school Notre-Dame-des-Neiges before Westmount High.

Chad Dunlevy • Montreal Gazette
Nov 20, 2020 • Last Updated 2 hours ago • 4 minute read



Retired educator Richard Mason projects a photo Kamala Harris from her days as a student at FACE school from his cellphone onto his television at his home near Knowlton on Thursday, Nov. 19, 2020. Mason was Harris's math teacher when she attended FACE school in 1976 to '78, before she attended Westmount High School. PHOTO BY JOHN MAHONEY /Montreal Gazette

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When Joe Biden was declared U.S. president-elect over Donald Trump, I was texting with a bunch of fellow FACE alumni.

“The only thing that would make this better were if Kamala Harris had gone to FACE instead of Westmount High,” I messaged my old buddies. Less than two weeks later, that wish came true.

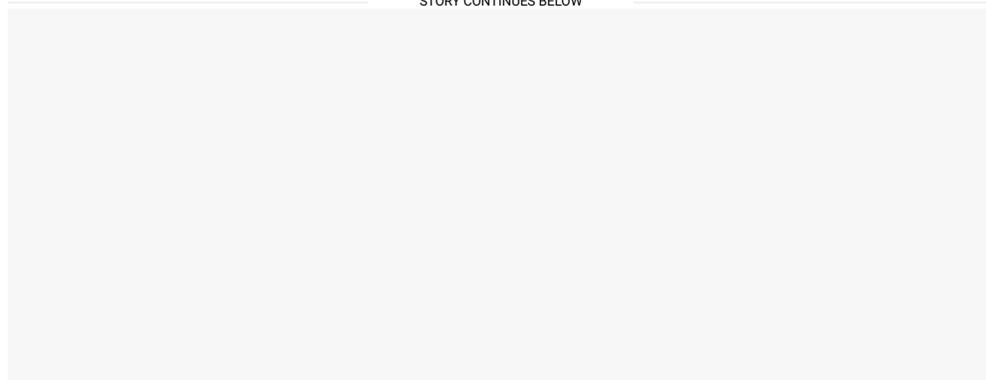


Until now, the generally accepted storyline was that during her time in Montreal, vice-president-elect Harris studied at a French primary school called Notre-Dame-des-Neiges before moving on to Westmount High School, graduating in 1981.

Turns out, there was a school in between: FACE, or FACES, as it was called in its first few years — an alternative public school originally dubbed Fine Arts Core Elementary School, then Fine Arts Core Education.

Harris and her younger sister Maya attended FACES in 1977-78 (and perhaps for a portion of the previous school year, 1976-77). Harris was in Grade 8 at the time.

STORY CONTINUES BELOW



Since the school only went to Grade 8 — it expanded to Grade 9 and upward beginning a year later — she and her classmates were forced to move on to other schools. Several of them ended up at Westmount High. (Maya stayed at FACE for at least another year.)

On the day the Biden-Harris victory was announced, B.C.-based NDP politician [Nicholas Simons](#) [tweeted](#) “Congratulations to my former classmate at @EcoleFaceSchool VP-elect @KamalaHarris from MLA-elect.”

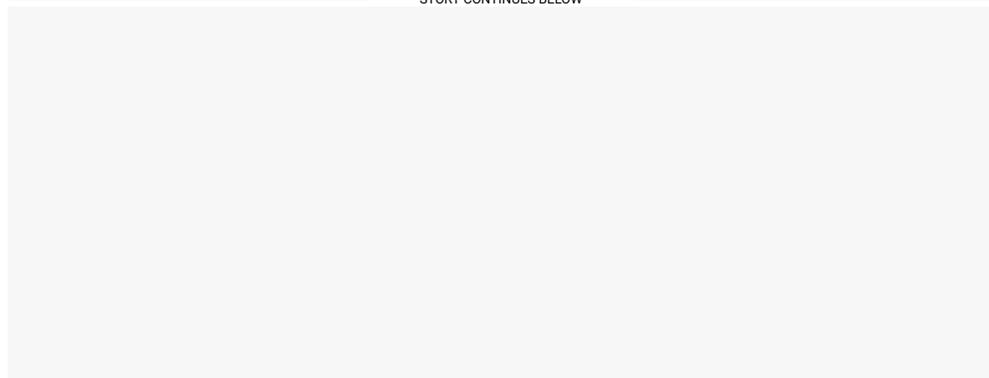


Kamala Harris is top-centre in a human pyramid of FACES students. The picture was taken on McGill Campus in 1978. Top L-R: Cindy Garmaise, Harris, Kimberley MacKenzie. In the middle row, far right, is Vicky Compton. In the background, just below Harris, is Nicholas Simons. PHOTO BY VICKY COMPTON.

He included an old photo of a gang of FACES students in a human pyramid, with Harris top-centre. Simons’s grinning mug can be seen in the background, behind Harris — photobombing before it was a thing.

That picture was taken in the spring of 1978 on McGill campus, across the street, where FACES students often hung out.

STORY CONTINUES BELOW



Simons was a year younger than Harris; and while he didn’t know her, he is chuffed about his brush with history.

“When I look at former FACE students, they all have something very humanist about them,” he said. “Many grads have done things related to music, theatre, politics, social themes or community.”

Richard Mason taught Harris math at FACES.

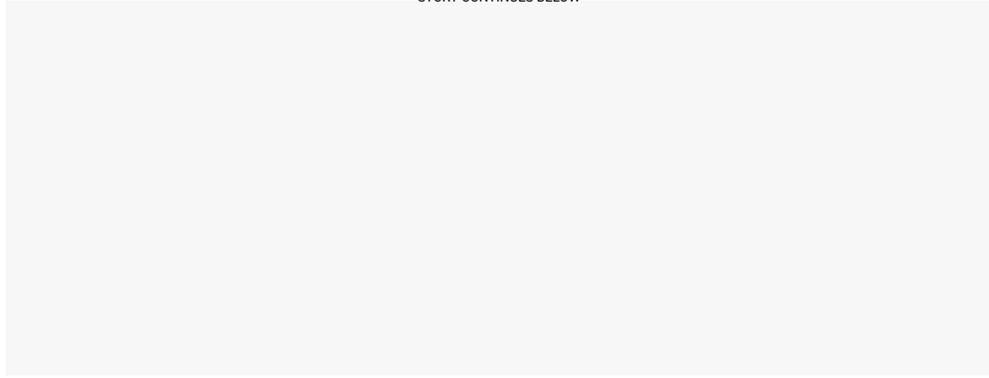
“She always had a smile,” he said. “She was very accommodating, very polite. She was a good student.”

He met her mother, Shyamala Gopalan, who had accepted a research and teaching position at the McGill University-affiliated Jewish General Hospital.

“She was introspective and well-spoken,” Mason said of Gopalan. “You could tell she had a strong

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Cindy Garmaise is on Harris’s right (our left) in the photo Simons posted. On Aug. 14, after Harris was named as Biden’s running mate, Garmaise shared the picture on Facebook along with recollections of Harris, whom she saw again when they both migrated to Westmount High.

Though they were not close, she recalls good times with Harris in science class at FACES.

“Mr. Chidoda was an awesome teacher, and a very funny guy,” Garmaise said. “She sat next to me. We giggled a lot.”

Garmaise remembered the name of Harris’s sister, and coincidentally ended up naming her daughter Maya (after Maya Angelou).

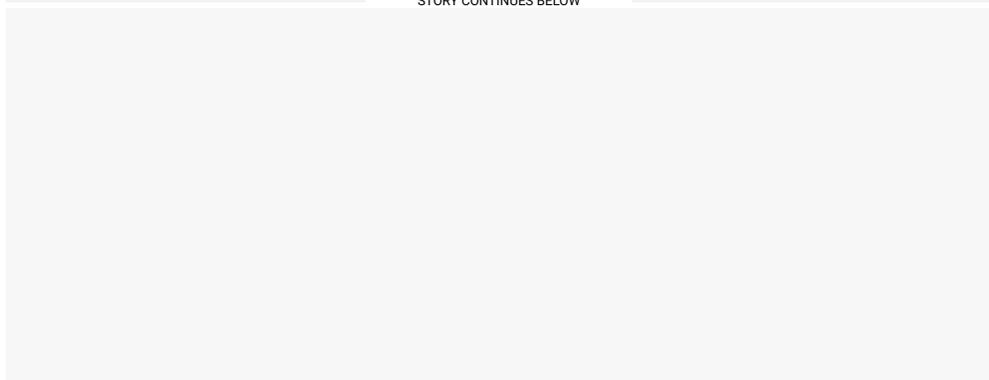
Kimberley MacKenzie is to Harris’s left (our right) in the picture. Like Simons, she was a year younger and didn’t know Harris personally.

“I remember that photo really well,” MacKenzie said. “I remember that shirt, it was one of my favourite shirts.

“FACE back then was really alternative and full of dynamic people. It makes sense that her mother would have chosen to send her there. It was happening, effervescent and bubbling. People felt they were doing something different with education.”

MacKenzie and other students took courses including copper enamelling, macramé, poetry, interior design, yoga and tie-dying.

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Vicky Compton found herself shouting at the TV screen while watching a national TV report on Harris that only mentioned her time at Westmount High.

“I yelled, ‘No, she was at FACE!’ ” said Compton, now a primary-school teacher in Ottawa. Compton can be seen below MacKenzie at the right of the photo, of which she has an original print.

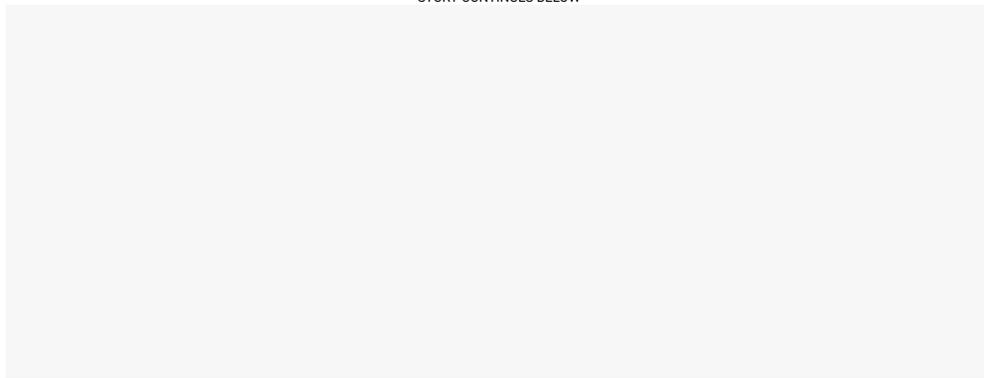
A classmate of Harris and Garmaise, she remembers the VP-elect as “spunky and full of life.”

Compton’s stepfather, Phillip Baugniet, co-founded FACES in 1975 and was its principal until 1991.

He remembers Maya Harris better than her sister — “I think she was there longer,” Baugniet said — but it makes sense to him that Kamala Harris ended up at the school, however briefly.

“I like to think that when (their mother) came to Montreal, she had plenty of choices. Most probably, she liked the sound of the kinds of things we were trying to do.

STORY CONTINUES BELOW



“I also like to think she’s just one of many FACE grads or ex-FACE students who have distinguished themselves in many ways.”

Not to put writing for the Montreal Gazette on par with being U.S. vice-president, but when I looked up [FACE School on Wikipedia](#), I was humbled to find my own name on a list of notable alumni that now includes Kamala Harris.

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