It wasn't built in a day

BY ELIZABETH BUSHEY

THEY CALLED THEMSELVES THE COMMITTEE FOR HIGHER EDUCATION. They were neighbors, friends, and educators, but mostly they were alarmed. Orange County residents needed more higher education opportunities, but how was the committee going to make it happen?

They had no blueprint for success. Today, the State University of New York boasts 64 campuses – 30 of them community colleges – but SUNY itself didn’t exist until 1948.

We’re used to the system by now, and thousands of us have been a part of the college, one way or another. Orange County Community College may seem like it was always meant to be – or that it was always here.

But that’s not how it happened. The college was founded in fits and starts and setbacks. It’s easy to praise the founders’ foresight with 50 years’ hindsight, it can’t have been so easy at the time. There were four frustrating years of struggle documented in the local press prior to the dedication of the first building; how long did they labor against near-impossible odds to bring it to life before the first rumblings in the press?

A college center group had formed as early as autumn 1946, under the chairmanship of then Middletown superintendent of schools Carl V. Warren. The group spent two years of dogged and largely fruitless – efforts to position a college center in the area. Offers came and went from high-prestige institutions like Columbia and Cornell University, who showed interest in the area but later pulled plans to locate extension centers in Orange, Sullivan or Ulster County.

It was then that the pressure became even more intense. A 1948 study showed that residents in the Orange County area had the “smallest percentage of young people attending college of any in New York State. (SUNY Orange LRC Archives, press clipping February 1948.)

And they had another problem: the GI were coming home, with the GI Bill behind them to pay tuition costs. Where were they going to go?