During a recent meal with friends, the subject suddenly became melancholic after one asked if we'd been by to see what the hill looks like after the Mississippi Chemical Corp. (MCC) administration building had been torn down.

“I'm telling you,” said one, a former MCC employee. “As I drove on the (Mississippi 3) bypass and saw that it was gone, I couldn't help but tear up.”

As the others, all former and long-time MCC employees, expressed their sorrow, I had to confess that although I'd never worked there, the void left by the demolition of that once-grand complex is heart-wrenching. How sad it is to see the deserted site where men and women once spent decades of their lives not only in building a company, their careers and their families, but in investing in and growing a community.

The overgrown hill upon which the building sat, once impeccably manicured and symbolic of prosperity and stability, is now mostly scrubland. Flimsy barriers erected by the property owners block the winding access road that once saw hundreds, perhaps thousands, of vehicles ascend and descend on a daily basis.

Life has a way of doing things like that. No matter who or what it is, as soon as you start to counting on it and to figuring it'll be around forever, it's gone.

Jerks your feet right out from under you.

Things change, and as hard as we fight it or deny it, everything keeps on changing without ever skipping a beat.

When yours truly moved to Yazoo City in 1967, Yazoo City High School (YCHS) was already legendary. Willie Morris, a YCHS graduate, was already on a roll. One of the school's most promising students, Haley Barbour, had graduated some four years earlier, and the school's curriculum and faculty was known to be the best when it came to college prep.

In those years, one of Yazoo City's greatest assets was its public school system. People came to live in Yazoo City partly because of the city's excellent schools. Parents supported the schools. The community's leaders supported the schools. School support was a given.

Things were good for a few decades.

But at some point, things took a turn for the worse.

Chaos, misguided ideals and ineptness in the school system's leadership began to eat away at the foundations of the schools in their charge. The white flight drained the schools of students and state funding. Traditional values were gradually replaced by alternate lifestyles. Family situations in a changing society posed threats that weakened a once grand curriculum, and Title One designation, a cash cow among public schools, became one of the school district's primary goals.

According to news reports, gangs now roam YCHS's halls and police presence has become common place. Hopefully, there are some successful teaching stories still to be had there, but all we hear of now is mostly about teachers who are throwing up their hands because discipline is a thing of the past.

It's easy for a person to say he knows what the problem is and how he would change it, but we all know about the difference between saying it and doing it.

How do you fix Yazoo City's struggling school district? To be successful at that would demand that you fix our struggling home situations, our unemployment problems, our crime problems, our progressively decreasing church memberships, our health and fitness needs, our housing needs and just about everything else that you need to have a healthy community.

Having spent 24 years teaching in YCHS's classrooms, it breaks my heart to read and hear about such chaos and instability in a once-grand school district. I count it an honor to have been a faculty member in such a fine school. Never in my wildest dreams did I ever imagine that conditions would get so bad.

I grieve for those students who are genuine about their desire to learn but can't because of the interruptions. I grieve for those teachers whose dreams of a successful teaching career have been challenged. I grieve for the administrators whose intentions are sterling and in the best interests of the students, but who can't lead due to the challenges coming from outside the schools.

As one person said during last week's community prayer and praise service, it's something that's gone far beyond Man's ability to fix. We need to pray daily for God to fix Yazoo City's school system.

Yazoo City High School has undergone some tremendous changes in the last three or four decades. Unlike MCC's administrative building, it's still standing.

It's been a long time since I walked its halls and felt the thrill of education it once held.

And every time I drive past the school, I can't help but tear up.