

Telling Our Stories

A Social History Project of Sweet Briar College

Voted as Sweet Briar's distinguished alumna for 1997, Georgene Vairo (class of '72) came back to campus and delivered a speech at the opening convocation, some 25 years after graduation. Now, eighteen years later, Georgene is the newly elected Secretary to the Sweet Briar Board of Trustees, and perhaps this is a good time to share her wonderful story. Here are some excerpts, touching on many of the themes that are so important... about the value of small classes, of having access to caring faculty, and of having a chance to become a leader.

Ethel Ogden Burwell '58, President of the Alumnae Association, introduced Georgene and listed a few of her many remarkable accomplishments.

Georgene has always been someone who gets involved in life. She started off at Sweet Briar as president of her freshman class and ended her student years as president of the Student Government and on the Dean's List. In between, she was an active member of the Bum Chums and Tau Phi, and was co-founder of a peer counseling service. Throughout her four years, she starred in varsity field hockey, basketball and lacrosse. (...No doubt this was the reason why, in 1981, she was able to complete the New York City Marathon in 3½ hours!) At the end of her senior year, Georgene was elected by her classmates to represent them as a member-at-large on the board of the Alumnae Association. Her strong commitment to Sweet Briar continues today.

As you can see from her Sweet Briar days, Georgene is a lady of multiple interests and talents. Upon graduating from Sweet Briar with a degree in economics, she continued to demonstrate this. She first took a job as an optical technician in Charlottesville – catching her breath and putting bread on the table – and subsequently enrolled at UVA, earning her masters of Education degree in social studies, with distinction. She then taught Junior High School Mathematics for several years before entering Fordham University School of Law. In law school, Georgene really found her niche. She was associate editor of the Law Review and a member of the championship National Moot Court team. She earned a number of prestigious academic awards and (here's that versatility again) was also on the National Law School Basketball championship team, the first woman to ever play in that tournament! In 1979, she was awarded her Doctor of Jurisprudence degree, graduating number one in her class of 320.

Now let me briefly mention some of the highlights of Georgene's distinguished legal career. She served as a law clerk to the Honorable Joseph M. McLaughlin, a U.S. Court of Appeals judge, when he sat with the U. D. District Court for the Eastern District of New York. What this really means is that Georgene drafted the legal opinions for the Judge of one of the busiest courts in the country. She then practiced antitrust law with Skadden Arps Slate Meagher & Flom before being persuaded by a colleague to return to Fordham Law School in 1982 as a member of the faculty. She then served the Law School as Associate Dean from 1987 until 1995 bringing that Law School from the status of a regional school to one of national prominence and reputation. In 1994, she was appointed to the Leonard F. Manning Chair. Also in 1994, she was invited to deliver the Burns lecture at Loyola University Law School in Los Angeles. In 1995, she crossed the

continent again to become a permanent member of their faculty, although, I understand that she still holds tenure at Fordham in their hope that she will return to them someday!

Georgene still finds time to serve on editorial boards of several litigation and dispute resolution journals, including the *ADR Quarterly* of the American Arbitration Association, and *The Practical Litigator* of the American Law Institute – American Bar Association. She was a member of the Second Circuit Task Force on Gender, Racial and Ethnic Fairness. As a member of the American Law Institute, she has served as an advisor for its Project on Complex Litigation.

I mentioned earlier Georgene's involvement with the Dalkon Shield Claimants Trust. This is, perhaps, where she is best known nationally. The Dalkon Shield case is familiar to many of us, but most of you students were very young at the time of the extensive publicity surrounding it in the 1980s, so a word of explanation. The Dalkon Shield was a contraceptive device, an IUD, which was found to be extremely harmful to many who used it. The Trust was established to resolve injury claims and as Chairperson of the Trust since 1989, Georgene has overseen the distribution of over 3.3 billion dollars to over 400,000 claimants. It was Georgene who made sure that every claimant, even the 70% who did not have fancy lawyers, has an equitable and fair settlement.

In private life, Georgene loves to participate in bicycling fund-raising events, for instance, the California AIDS ride, a 550-mile ride from San Francisco to Los Angeles, which she has done twice, and the Florida AIDS ride from Orlando to Miami Beach. (Perhaps it's that Sweet Briar sports training again!) She also enjoys tennis, gardening and her beloved Golden Retrievers.

One might think this alumna, who keeps such an unbelievably busy schedule and takes 550-mile bike rides in her free time, would be (or should be) exhausted. NOT Georgene. There is no sign of that. To use her words, she *loves* life. She approaches everything she does with tremendous zest, enthusiasm, and humor, as those of you who know who had a chance to visit with her today or last night. It is a very great honor, as well as a delight, to claim Georgene as a fellow alumna and to confer upon her the 1997 Distinguished Alumna Award.

Now, from Georgene's speech:

Did I just die? Thank you, Ethel, for such a warm introduction. For once, I am at a loss for words. It has been almost 25 years since my last visit to Sweet Briar. That time, school was not in session, and I just hiked and paddled around the lake. Coming back after so many years has been an emotional experience. It is always revealing to think about where you have been, and how you got where you are today. Travelling down Route 29 last evening, with my good friend Sarah Clement of the Class of 1975 who is sitting in the back somewhere, brought back all kinds of memories.

I am delighted to be here; absolutely honored to be here; but mostly surprised and amazed to be here receiving this award. The last time I was within 20 feet of the college president and dean, (of course, not this president and dean), they actually were asking me to leave the college. I remember being called into the dean's office after my freshman year. The dean said: "Georgie, (everybody called me Georgie in those days), you have not distinguished yourself academically or socially." I replied, "But, I passed." She

responded: "How would you like to transfer to Princeton? They have just gone co-ed." My reply: "How could I possibly get in with my grades?" She then said": "Don't worry about that. It's already been arranged. Just go."

Well, since that time, I have asked myself many times whether the dean was right. Should I have transferred to Princeton? Or was it best that I stayed at Sweet Briar? Of course, at the time, I decided to stay out of pure stubbornness. She wanted me to go. So, of course, I had to stay. But now, I am prepared to give you my answer, and the answer is a resounding **NO**. I am glad that I did not transfer to Princeton, and I am glad that I decided to stay at Sweet Briar. Now, I will tell you why...

How she learned to write...

One of my English professors essentially threw one of my papers back at me saying it was not good enough. He told me I had to rewrite the paper. I thought: Well, I had written it about fifteen minutes before it was due, and, I thought, that was about as good as it gets with me. The idea that I had to reread what I wrote: How horrifying! That I could make it better? - Inconceivable! I tried a bit to improve the paper and turned it in. The professor informed me that the paper still wasn't good enough. I told him I did not know how to make it better, and then he sat down with me and went over the entire paper. He asked me what I was trying to say. I would tell him. Then he would say, don't you want to write it this way? We went over the whole paper. And, I got it. Unfortunately, I learned this rather late in my academic career at Sweet Briar, but I learned how to be critical of my writing, how to sharpen my language to make my points, and how to edit my own work. Now I love to write. I write law review articles and books that may put people to sleep. But, I also like to write poetry, or books on hiking, and how not to get lost riding your bike. I like to write. I love to write and I learned how to do that here.

About her chemistry professor...

Another one of my professors is sitting in the front row today. Professor McClenon was my chemistry professor. When I first arrived at Sweet Briar, I thought I would major in chemistry. I even did pretty well in the first semester basic course, probably because it was mainly a review of materials I had learned in high school. Then, I had to take organic chemistry. Well, unfortunately, I spent too much time playing bridge in the Pit rather than studying. So, I have to thank Professor McClenon for giving me a D+ rather than the F- that I really deserved. I may not have learned much chemistry from Professor McClenon. But that certainly was not his fault.

But I have to mention him for another reason. I can't go into all the stories now. This is a formal occasion. But, he served as an example for me. I was mind of a trouble-maker then. I don't mean to suggest that he was a trouble maker, or that he supported me in my troublemaking. Rather, he served as a real moral example and taught me to think about doing the right thing and about doing justice in the world. He served as a great role model in how he went about his life. I got from him the idea that it is important to go out into the world and do good. Whether you do it as a Democrat or a Republican or

whatever is hardly the point. Just go out in the world and do good for others; try to make the world a better, more just place.

Life lessons...

There are so many stories. I learned about the need to take personal responsibility from another professor. I turned in a psychology paper a day late. This was when I was a freshman and really bad. I tried to excuse the lateness by telling the professor that I had been at a student government meeting the night before and so was unable to get the paper done in time. She told me that the reason why the paper was late was because Georgene Vairo made it late. The student government meeting was not the problem. It was my failure to use my time wisely. I did not like hearing the lecture at the time. But, she was right. Don't make excuses. We have to take responsibility for our actions. If you want to go out and have fun and do what you want to do, that's fine. But, you also have to suck it up and take responsibility for what you have done or not done. That was an important lesson to learn for life.

Opportunities to be a student leader...

Another reason why I am glad I did not transfer is because I had the opportunity to be a student leader here. I doubt that I would have had the same opportunities as a co-ed school. Now, of course, when I was a student, we didn't have the pressing issues that you have, like 24-7. But we did have very important issues. We had the issue of whether we still had to wear white gloves for shopping trips into Lynchburg, and whether we had to sign out for this or that. I was relatively conservative socially when I first got to Sweet Briar. But, this was too much.

Of course, we did have important issues then as you do now. The important thing was that I was taken seriously as a student leader. I really do not think that I would have had the opportunity to develop my speaking ability, to think on my feet, or how to develop a consensus without the opportunities that I had to lead here. Even some of the deans took me seriously. I will never forget Dean Jester. She was so amazing to me. Dean Jester, those of you who know her will agree, was an incredible lady.

Thinking back on it, it must have been an amazingly incongruous sight to see Dean Jester and me in a room talking about College issues. She had that perfect hair, and always wore a perfect little flowered dress. She was this incredibly dignified woman; just a model lady, the kind I could never be. Then there was me. I would be sitting there with my blue jeans, my long hair, my combat boots, and my green Army jacket, which Professor Miller just told me he remembered me wearing all the time, with peace signs all over it. Dean Jester would be sitting there quietly listening. I would be waving my hands all around as we talked. She wanted me to explain to her why the students wanted to get rid of this rule, get rid of that rule, get rid of whatever. We wanted to get rid of everything, it seemed. But, she took what I told her seriously. And that was so important: to be taken seriously by an adult. I really do not think I would have had that kind of an opportunity at another kind of school. I learned here and was taken seriously.

Participation in sports...

I also appreciate the opportunity I had at Sweet Briar to compete in team sports. Our basketball team always lost, it seemed. But we had great field hockey and lacrosse teams. The reality of being a woman entering the professional world is that it still is largely a man's world. You have to know how to deal with that. I found that my sports background was a tremendous advantage. Because I understood the camaraderie developed in team sports, and could talk about such things with the men I worked with, I found that we were always at ease with one another. It did not feel like we were a few men and a woman in the room. We were people in the room.

It's nice to see so many sports offered here now. We had basketball, tennis, field hockey and lacrosse. You have all that plus volleyball, swimming and diving. I hope you all take advantage of the sports offered here, and the recreational opportunities this beautiful campus provides: hiking, mountain biking and more. As you get out there in life, whether you are in a profession of having children, having a strong body to go along with a strong mind really helps you deal with the various stresses you will encounter through life.

Little protests...

The last thing I want to mention in terms of why it is good that I stayed at Sweet Briar is another little anecdote. When I was a junior, President Nixon decided to bomb Cambodia, and many students and faculty here were quite upset about it. We decided to start our own series of educational programs about the Vietnam War, perhaps have some kind of strike, but certainly some protest activity. And so a number of students and faculty worked together to put out leaflets and other materials, and planned a number of campus events. All of a sudden, a few carloads of boys arrived from Princeton – I suppose they were the guys who were supposed to pick me up after my freshman year – They arrive, and the next thing I know, I am being told to stuff envelopes for them. I said to myself, there is something wrong with this picture – we used to call the shots around here, and now all we get to do is stuff envelopes. I remember that after a bit, some friends of mine and I informed the fellows that their services were no longer required, and we asked them to leave and we had our own little protests.

...So I think you can tell from all that I have told you that I made the right choice to stay here at Sweet Briar. I certainly did not make a mistake in refusing to go to Princeton. And, in fact, I made quite the right choice to stay here. I began to grow up, although I don't think I will ever be able to say I fully completed that task. I started to learn how to think, and most importantly, I certainly learned how to keep learning through life. And because of that, I have had a great life, a good life, a fun life, and a rewarding life.

What her classmates are doing...

And, I am not alone. I think about what my classmates and friends are doing: Sarah Clement, who is here today, obtained her J.D. degree from the University of Virginia, and is now a judge for the Merit Systems Protection Board in Washington, D.C.

Marion Walker, who was here earlier today, is now practicing civil rights law in Birmingham, Alabama; Jana Sawicki received her Ph.D. in philosophy, and currently is teaching philosophy, feminism, and women's studies at Williams College in Amherst, Massachusetts; Add Tedards, who was a Sweet Tone, and also an apartment-mate of mine in New York City for years, continues to perform as a singer. She is a professor at the University of Oregon and is now the president of their faculty senate; Martha Brewer studied philosophy for a while and then became a doctor, practicing ObGyn in New Orleans. She recently moved to North Carolina to set up a practice for women there; and Mimi Fahs, who also has earned a Ph.D., is teaching and consulting in the health economics area at Mt. Sinai Hospital in New York City.

I could go on and on about my friends whom I have kept up with and the amazing things they and my classmates are doing in their lives. I asked the Alumnae Office to send me a list of what my classmates are doing, and it is remarkable: they are ministers, lawyers, doctors, business women, and animal breeders. They are women, with children, who are doing all kinds of public service activities all over the country. I am so proud of my friends and classmates, and I know I will be proud of all of you.

I hope you will get what you want out of Sweet Briar College, and I know you will. If I made a mistake it was in not taking greater advantage of the small classes offered here, and the wonderful teachers. You have the opportunity to be in this beautiful setting for four years, and to learn how to learn for life.

Sharpening her tools...

We all have to figure out how to make our own way in life. I certainly have had my lumps. But, I got the tools I needed while I was a student here. Obviously, I sharpened those tools while I was a law student, and each professional experience enriched my life and makes me a better lawyer and teacher. I found my way, and you, too, students, will find your way. You will figure out how to be you, and figure out how to do what you need to do to have a happy, fun and rewarding life. I want you all to care about who you are and the people all around you. I want you to learn how to care and be yourself. I want you to go out and do what you can for the world, your country, and your community. But I want you to do it your way. Margaret Thatcher did it her way; Princess Diana did it her way; now we see Madeline Albright doing it her way; and Mother Theresa did it her way; Justices Ginsberg and O'Connor do it their way; and I want to see you do it your way too.

After the speech, Ann Tedards (class of '70), former Sweet Tone, who had written a poem for the occasion, led everyone singing:

Georgene, Georgene, how can this be?
You raised such hell at SBC
Broke all the rules for your legacy
At our dear, Old Sweet Briar

Somehow, somehow you must have changed
For weren't we all just a bit deranged?
Now you're Distinguished and reek of fame
Who would have ever thought this could be?

Georgene, Georgene we're all so proud
For you are standing out in the crowd
Showing the world without a doubt
The excellence of our Sweet Briar.