

LAFAYETTE ALUMNI NEWS

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College marks 20 years of coeducation

One alumnus predicted that "more and better campus riots" would result from coeducation at Lafayette, as male students would muster all their machismo to impress female classmates.

Jack Sher, a local associate alumnus, imagined an age of romance and contentment on College Hill in his poem, "On Co-ed-ing at Lafayette." The newcomers would be "Heaven s(c)ented."

Other dire or wishful auguries, ranging from the collapse of engineering and varsity sports to more neatness in male students' grooming habits, preceded the arrival of Lafayette's first "coeds."

Faculty members, who overwhelmingly supported the admission of women, hoped for a higher-quality applicant pool, new perspectives to enlighten classroom discussions, a happier and more balanced extracurricular life for students, and a strengthening of the humanities curriculum. Their opinions came pretty close to the mark.

Women's 20-year presence on campus has changed the College significantly. At the same time, Lafayette's particular culture has affected the lives of its women students and graduates. Some of those effects were discussed in a series of events marking both Women's History Month and the twentieth anniversary of coeducation at Lafayette. Alumnae and alumni, students, faculty members and administrators participated in March programs which examined the transition to coeducation and its current status. After 20 years and more than 3,100 female graduates, many argue that the transition is not yet complete.



Sandra Oehlert Yanisko '86 and her father, James Oehlert '61, consider the changes brought about by 20 years of coeducation at Lafayette during a panel discussion entitled "Lafayette Fathers, Lafayette Daughters."

A panel discussion entitled "Women's Lives in the Real World: Alumnae Speak Out" considered how well the College had prepared alumnae for their careers, relationships, and family lives. A markedly diverse panel expressed surprising unanimity in a number of areas. Participants were Thembi Mhlambiso '86, reporter for a trade journal in NYC; Tanya Jackson '85, a PhD candidate in anthro-botany at Harvard; Barbara Kerlavage Siegel '79, market segment manager for Du Pont; Diane Vollweiler Elliott '74, a Bethlehem, PA, attorney; and Robin Wiessmann '75, a principal and co-founder of Artemis Capital Group, Inc.

It so happened that not one of the panelists had followed a straight or traditional path through college and into a career; each one was grateful that Lafayette had given her the opportunity and the courage to meander, delving into changing areas of academic interest.

Lafayette had thickened their skins, they said, and taught them to compete head-to-head with men. Elliott, who recently ran for public office, recalls being asked why she wasn't at home with her kids. Sexism is very much alive in the "real world," the panelists agreed.

One surprising point made by the panel was that they had learned to

handle alcohol at Lafayette. In their personal and professional lives, this proved a handy skill to have.

George Woodring '19 remembers that his class was 100 percent opposed to coeducation, according to their responses to a 1969 survey conducted by the *Lafayette Alumnus*. But he also remembers how quickly classmates' opinions changed when their granddaughters began applying to, and attending the College. Of the classes of the 1960s, on the other hand, 58 percent supported the moves to coeducation, and many of their daughters and sons matriculated at Lafayette during the 1980s.

That 1960s generation was heard from in another panel discussion involving two sets of Lafayette fathers and Lafayette daughters, who compared the College of the 1960s with the coeducational institution that replaced it.

Doug LaPasta '67 and his daughter Lara '92, Jim Oehlert '61 and Sandra Oehlert Yanisko '86, and Jennifer Kinard '91, daughter of John Kinard '52 (who couldn't attend) made up the panel.

Jim Oehlert said that while he still finds it odd to see pictures of women in engineering classes in Lafayette publications, he's glad about the changes; nothing was particularly valuable about the all-male environment, he believes. Doug LaPasta agreed that he had made no conscious decision to attend a male college; nevertheless, most of the schools he considered applying to—selective colleges in the Northeast—excluded women.

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20 years of coeducation (continued)

Mr. LaPasta recalled that an inordinate amount of students' time was spent trying to arrange for contacts with women. He also noted the absence of depth in arts and music courses. "You couldn't even run a film program except during a party weekend," said LaPasta, a philosophy major and McKelvy Scholar. He described an environment of intolerance for "differentness in any form."

The daughters of Doug LaPasta and Jim Oehlert said they hadn't thought about Lafayette's all-male history when applying to colleges, but they found evidence of it after arriving. Sandi Oehlert considered it unfair that, in the mid-eighties, all sororities were housed off-campus (in some cases, several blocks away) and that there were no sorority meal plans available. Lara LaPasta agreed that men still enjoy preferential treatment in terms of housing, dining, and athletic facilities.

Jennifer Kinard, a softball team center fielder, said coeducation had been mostly successful. She doesn't expect her athletic team will ever garner the publicity or the resources assigned to football or men's basketball. She does believe that campus

friendships between men and women students are now natural, relaxed, and healthy.

One of the arguments offered against coeducation was that women on campus were a distraction.

Anthony Rossi '68, who attended the program with his daughter, Jennifer '93, explained that in the context of the unnatural all-male environment, women were indeed a distraction. "If a woman walked into the front door of a fraternity house on a Wednesday night, jaws would drop—to call it a "distraction" would be an understatement. But in the normal situation, with women and men living and relating as friends, the problem disappears."

Christine Capone Sandy '74 represented Lafayette's first class of women on a panel entitled "The Transition Years." Other panelists included Professor Albert Gendebien '34, who chaired the faculty committee which ultimately recommended coeducation; Dr. Roald Bergethon, then president of Lafayette; and Professors Jim Lusardi '55 and Joanne Follweiler. Follweiler was one of only a handful of women on Lafayette's faculty before the start of coeducation.

Christine Capone Sandy entered college in 1970 as a math major and graduated as an art history major

with a business minor. Her first job was with Midlantic National Bank, where she was the first woman management trainee to be placed as a credit analyst in the head office's lending department. Later, looking for a career that would link her interest in art and applied mathematics, she entered a Cornell master's program in landscape architecture. Sandy now works part-time doing landscape design in partnership with her husband's site construction business and cares for their two children.

Sandy credits the administration and faculty with supporting her as she explored different paths and then settled on the one that was right for her. "There was a warmth and supportiveness, a family atmosphere, that made those first years easier," she recalls.

The biggest drawback, according to Sandy, was the social situation. The number of women students was still low, and Lafayette was still "very much a male institution."

"You saw upperclassmen in classes or the library, but then they disappeared. And on away-game weekends it was a ghost town," she says. "Yet there wasn't a deep interest in establishing sororities. At first, we were more interested in making our social

life more natural, less formal. The arts center and the new college center would have been wonderful for us."

"Many of us were eager to compete in women's sports," says Sandy. "At first we had no locker room. We were assigned time in the men's locker room. Some of us tried out for cheerleader during the first week of class. The Friday before the game, we were issued oversize varsity sweaters. That's all. The men always wore white slacks. That evening, we went downtown, bought fabric, and spent the night making six white pleated cheerleading skirts. We wore them the next day, and thought it was all great fun."

"I consider my Lafayette experience a real treasure," says Sandy. "I chose Lafayette because of its excellent math program and because I'd be a pioneer, and I found the same attitude among many of my women friends in the class. We valued the idea that what we did had special meaning for a very special institution." ■

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