

TAPE ONE SIDE ONE

**Vivienne Felix:** Today is Friday September 13<sup>th</sup> 2002, and we are in the Special Collections Reading Room of Skillman Library. We're here with Michelle Vedus-Deeney, a member of the Class of 1974 as part of an oral history project sponsored by the Lafayette College Archives. Thank you for agreeing to be a participant.

**Michelle Vedus-Deeney:** My pleasure.

**VF:** First please tell me about your family and where you grew up.

**MVD:** I am the oldest of 3 daughters and I spent my high school years in Wayne, NJ attending Wayne Valley H.S. Before that I lived in Ridgefield Park, NJ.

**VF:** What was your high school experience like?

**MVD:** High school was relatively easy for me academically. I had the ability to excel without having to do much studying. I was able to spend time being involved in a lot of different things. One thing I vividly remember is that my high school offered half-year courses and one of them was psychology. Up until that point I had really focused from a very early age on wanting to go to medical school and become a doctor. Having that exposure to psychology really fine tuned my focus and I decided that if I was going into medicine, I wanted to explore psychiatry. That

was one of the reasons why Lafayette appealed to me because they had a very strong premed program as well as the opportunity to get very involved in psychology.

**VF:** Had others in your family attended college?

**MVD:** Actually my father went directly from high school into the Navy. He later spent six years in night school before he got his Bachelor's degree. I guess I must have been ten or eleven years old when he finally graduated college. My mother had always been a stay-at-home mom. She spent most of her freetime reading. She just loved to read although I doubt she realized how intelligent she was. She actually started college the same year I started high school and graduated the June before I left for college with a degree in special education. Both of my parents were the ones in their families to have graduated college.

**VF:** What other colleges if any did you apply to?

**MVD:** I applied to Bucknell<sup>1</sup>, Gettysburg<sup>2</sup>, Pembroke<sup>3</sup> which is part of Brown, Boston University<sup>4</sup>, Douglas<sup>5</sup> which is now part of Rutgers and Lafayette.

**VF:** How did you choose those colleges to apply to?

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<sup>1</sup> Bucknell University, Lewisburg, Pennsylvania.

<sup>2</sup> Gettysburg College, Gettysburg, Pennsylvania.

<sup>3</sup> Pembroke College is now a part of Brown University, Providence, Rhode Island.

<sup>4</sup> Boston University, Boston, Massachusetts.

<sup>5</sup> Douglass College is an all women's branch of Rutgers University, New Brunswick, New Jersey.

**MVD:** I was looking for some place that was within an hour or two from home. I was looking for a school that was strong academically my interest in Lafayette actually came about as a fluke. A male friend of mine who was in my psychology class told me that he had gotten an application for Lafayette that he decided not to use. I hadn't considered Lafayette or even heard about Lafayette. At that point in time, there had not been an official decision to accept women. I recall that the application was relatively simple and the fee was low, so I decided I might as well just send it in. I remember visiting Lafayette, and the moment I came on campus and specifically came into the library I just knew this had to be the place for me. I just felt very safe and comfortable--almost as if there was a protective bubble that kind of enclosed the campus. It felt safe and secure and it was the right size for me. I thought it was the most beautiful school I had seen. And the library just gave this feeling of scholarly-ness and richness. And so at that point I decided I wanted to go to Lafayette even though Lafayette. Women of the first class were allowed to indicate Lafayette as "first choice" as early decision was not an option. So I right away said "Lafayette's my first choice." I remember hoping that they would decide to vote to accept women. The vote passed and my acceptance from Lafayette came within a week. That was the late autumn and I accepted immediately. They made going coed a media event focusing on the first twenty-five women who were accepted at Lafayette. They really courted us and it just felt really, really special being part of all that. It was special going to a school where you have a whole new experience and an opportunity to do something that no one has done before. So that was very exciting being a part of the first class of women.

**VF:** Given that Lafayette was just turning coeducational what did your family think about you applying to Lafayette?

**MVD:** They had always been extremely supportive in whatever I wanted to do. My parents both had a very good feeling about the campus. I think after I got here and I didn't do as well academically as I had in high school because Lafayette required more of me academically than high school. They may have been concerned but it was never a major issue. Throughout my life they always supported me in my non-traditional choices, such as medicine as a career for women. They were very comfortable with me coming here and with what the school had to offer. In fact my father remarked many times that had he in his day had an opportunity to go away to college that Lafayette is the place he would have wanted to go. So they were comfortable with my decision.

**VF:** What did you think that college would be like?

**MVD:** I thought it would be academically easier. I thought it would be more as things were in high school where it required little effort to rise to the top. I really wish that I knew how to study better when I came here because my whole learning experience would have been very different. I have to admit I was easily seduced by the fact that Lafayette was a party school. I frequently didn't go to my eight o'clock science classes and I didn't learn as much as I could. It took me a couple years to learn how to be a student and find my niche. So I missed out on a lot. But I try to reframe it in a positive way, that it was a tremendous growing experience for me both socially and academically. So although at times it was difficult for me and I was not emotionally well grounded, I did learn a lot about myself and matured quite a bit.

**VF:** How do you feel that the presence of women on the Lafayette campus altered the academic and social atmosphere?

**MVD:** Well, it was very strange in the beginning. In the beginning the men were used to party weekends that turned into these major productions. You'd have a football game weekend and everything focused on it from Friday afternoon until early Sunday afternoon by the time people, got their heads clear enough to study. The male students had their girlfriends from home visit or women would come in from Cedar Crest<sup>6</sup> or from Centenary<sup>7</sup>. Some male students verbalized that if women were attractive then they couldn't compete academically. And it was really an education for them to learn to learn that women could compete. We demonstrated that we were active in the classroom, and that we weren't on campus just for social occasions. This was difficult for some men to see. I also think women softened things up somehow. I think that Lafayette realized that it needed to expand beyond the highly technical courses in science and engineering and offer more in the humanities and the arts. And so I think that overall the introduction of women had a very positive impact I think there are now clearly healthier relationships between men and women students. There have been a lot of real positive changes. I also wonder that if financially the college would have been able continue to exist, if it hadn't gone coed. It would have been really difficult. I think women have done a tremendous amount for this school.

**VF:** Was there an orientation for the female students?

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<sup>6</sup> Cedar Crest College, Allentown, Pennsylvania.

<sup>7</sup> Centenary College, Hackettstown, New Jersey.

**MVD:** Yes, there was. There was a special ceremony to acknowledge the first 25 coeds and in the summertime they had an orientation for all freshmen for two or three days. They organized experiences to expose us to college life. It was an opportunity to meet some students before you came here in September. And it was really valuable.

**VF:** After the excitement of arriving, of arriving passed was it easy for you to get settled and find your friends and make yourself comfortable on the campus?

**MVD:** Absolutely. One of the things that they did is they put all of the women into one location so we could take on this challenge together. And it was great. There was tremendous camaraderie that developed. It was very easy to meet people. And, you know, we were all pioneers, and so it was really fun.

**VF:** How was your roommate experience?

**MVD:** Actually it was fine. I met my roommate for freshman year before I started here. One of my friends in high school had gone to camp with Patty who was also going to Lafayette. She lived twenty minutes away. We were introduced and decided that we'd room together. It was comforting to know my roommate. We had spoken a lot on the phone beforehand and that kind of thing. So we partnered up to brave this experience. As it turned out we were very different and our circle of friends turned out to be different. But we should some very special times.

**VF:** How did your housing arrangement go in the following years?

**MVD:** They had a lottery. You'd pick numbers and then based on where on campus they decided that women were allowed to live you would have your choice of rooms. I think my second year I was over in Watson and then I wound up over in Gates for my junior year and back over to Watson for my senior year. It was before they had the apartments or any other options. You know, it was much more limited in terms of buildings available for women. And, in fact, I think it was my senior year that my dorm was the coed dorm.

**VF:** Do you remember what the reactions were to this coeducational dorm?

**MVD:** I think they were mixed. There were some people who preferred to be in a same sex dorm but since men and women lived on alternative floors it was not a problem for most. Initially freshmen year the rule was no men were allowed above the lobby downstairs. Then that relaxed. You could see the progression, and any anxiety that there might have been or dissipates. So I don't think that there was any major issue with the coed dorm. That makes me think of a story about how I initially signed up to be on the newspaper. Here I am, a new coed here, with a newspaper deciding to be controversial. By the way, my freshmen year followed the year when students went on strike because of the Vietnam War. So my freshman class represented a "calmer, pretty" group. Anyway, I signed up to be on the newspaper and it was decided that there should be a story about how birth control was not being offered by the student health center. So I thought, "Okay, I can write that article." You know I said, "I can write that article." Not thinking through the possible ramifications of my name being associated with the topic. And so I wrote the article in a tongue in cheek tone ending with, "Don't they realize that a

hundred and twenty-seven coeds ten months from now could have a hundred twenty-seven children who might require..." And I went down and interviewed staff at Easton Planned Parenthood<sup>8</sup>, and put all that information in the article. I got hate letters from anonymous people in Easton. I learned that you have to temper what you say. I know that there is a much healthier balance these days on campus.

**VF:** Do you remember what the campus reaction was to issues such as *Roe v. Wade*<sup>9</sup>?

**MVD:** There was a lot of support for it. But I don't know that as a student body we rallied, advocated, or were as involved as we could have been. You know, I think kind of fell in between two majors surges -- the Vietnam War and feminism. We saw ourselves as believing in and promoting equality, but it was done in subtle ways. There clearly was support for right to personal choice and the women who were here were here because they really felt that there should be equal opportunities.

**VF:** How did your ideas about feminism change between your first and last years at Lafayette?

**MVD:** I don't know when I came here that I really felt I was a feminist because feminism was more subtle then. I remember when I was in graduate school before I became familiar with feminist authors and was more active in the cause. When I came here I just felt that my gender

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<sup>8</sup> Planned Parenthood Federation of America (PPA) promotes the right of each individual to manage their own fertility. PPA also provides reproductive health care services.

<sup>9</sup> *Roe v. Wade* was a Supreme Court decision issued on January 22, 1973, which declared that a Texas law prohibiting first trimester abortion unconstitutionally violated a woman's right to privacy. The practical result of the decision was the legalization of abortion without undue restrictive interference from the government in the first twelve weeks of pregnancy across the nation



was not an issue and I always had unconditional, unquestioning support of my family for whatever I wanted to do. It was an exciting opportunity to be a member of the first class of women, but it didn't feel like I was necessarily a feminist trailblazer. It was just something special that I had a chance to do. I think my awareness and knowledge of feminism developed as I matured. I became more aware of what the experience was for other women who had fewer choices and who did not have the opportunities I had. That angered me and impassioned me to do more advocacy. So I guess in that sense I went from a place of being comfortable with who I was with my opportunities to realizing that that is not the experience of many women. I developed a commitment to correct that injustice somehow as I moved along.

**VF:** Were you involved in any political movements?

**MVD:** Most of my commitment was to social issues. It involved tutoring the children in Easton. It was working in areas of racial relations. I have always looked to be involved with others from diverse backgrounds. This was challenging at Lafayette, but I worked at it. One of the things I'm concerned about at Lafayette is the lack of although I am aware of attempts to bring in students of many types. So, on a personal level, I attempted to cross boundaries my other commitment, in addition to tutoring was to work with autistic children at a child development center in Bethlehem. Those were my interests and the areas in which I devoted energy.

**VF:** What other kind of extracurricular activities were you involved in?

**MVD:** I was a substitute cheerleader sophomore year. I was also a teaching assistant for an introductory psychology course.

**VF:** Were you ever involved in sports?

**MVD:** I never was like very athletic, until recent years, and so I always just kind of shied away from sports. My roommates were active in sports, but I just never was.

**VF:** Was there a particular attitude the campus held towards women being involved in sports activities?

**MVD:** Opportunities were limited at the time. There was field hockey, cheerleading and basketball. I don't even think they had women's soccer. Sports were accepting as long as women stayed within these prescribed women's teams. Clearly it is different today.

**VF:** What was your best experience outside of the classroom?

**MVD:** The opportunity to work with autistic children at the child development center. It made me more certain that I wanted to be in this field for my life's work.

**VF:** As you remember it what were some of the most pressing issues for women while you were in college?

**MVD:** Well one of the ones I already mentioned was being able to demonstrate that I could academically compete with men and go on to a satisfying career as a result of my academic life.

**VF:** Was there enough housing for women?

**MVD:** I think there was although the options were limited. I think the women who moved off campus did so because of choice and not insufficient supply on campus.

**VF:** What was the role of the college administration in assimilating new female students? As the year went on I know that there were was an orientation before the classes actually started, but, you know, once you're actually on campus what did they do if anything?

**MVD:** The administration would have alumni dinners and they would invite a couple of coeds to each one so that the alumni could get to meet us. In retrospect, it seems we were paraded around. You know it actually contrasts with the feminism that we all kind of felt on some level. But at the time, we enjoyed the attention and the chance to show alumni that coeducation was good. So I did get the sense that the administration really supported us.

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**VF:** Did you find that there were enough infrastructures for support for women?

**MVD:** At the time I felt there were. In retrospect there could have been more opportunities for women to come together in more structured supportive ways to allow for more formal sharing of the pioneering experience.

**VF:** In the residence halls did you help in creating any type of dorm liberal social code or some type of standard for living in the residence hall?

**MVD:** Yes. At first, men were not allowed in the dorm except for the lobby. We advocated for changes that would make policies consistent with those that the men had.

**VF:** To your knowledge were there ever any issues of sexual harassment, abuse either physical or emotional, rape or assault for any of the women on campus?

**MVD:** Not that I'm aware of in fact, it felt incredibly safe. I remember feeling safe walking on the campus at night.

**VF:** How did the social life for women differ from that of men?

**MVD:** Well there weren't as many organized activities for women. I think a lot of women's social lives actually revolved around male-focused activities such as fraternities. But there was support for the development of women's activities—we just had to start them.

**VF:** You spoke about divisions in the campus on the basis of race. Were there ever any divisions among the women in terms of class or religion as well?

**MVD:** No, not that I experienced.

**VF:** What type of music did you listen to?

**MVD:** It was rock, and pop. The Moody Blues<sup>10</sup> were big, Neil Young<sup>11</sup>, James Taylor<sup>12</sup> and Joni Mitchell<sup>13</sup>. I remember the Joni Mitchell album played over and over and over again. You're making it all come back. (*Laughter*)

**VF:** What was the role of music in your Lafayette experience?

**MVD:** There was a lot of it! You would walk in the dorm and every room would have something different playing. People had music going all the time. You could take our beds, you could take our desks, you could take our, but don't take our stereo.

**VF:** How did the Greek system impact your social experience?

**MVD:** Well as I said before my social experience was tied to fraternity activities and parties. I tended to have loyalties to certain houses and those were the ones I went to most. But on a party

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<sup>10</sup> The Moody Blues are a British rock and rhythm and blues group that began performing in the late 1960s.

<sup>11</sup> Neil Young has been composing and recording since the 1970s. His hits include "Southern Man."

<sup>12</sup> James Taylor began recording in 1968 and continues to do so to this day.

<sup>13</sup> Songwriter, singer, and musician who has been recording since the late 1960s as a folk and jazz singer.

weekend you could go down to any house and have fun. A lot of the activity on campus did revolve around the fraternities.

**VF:** Did your social life change at all over your years at Lafayette?

**MVD:** Absolutely! I became much calmer and the environment fostered healthier male female relationships.

**VF:** What was the student relationship with other colleges in the Lehigh Valley area?

**MVD:** You know they always talked about the fact that there, that there was the relationship with Muhlenberg<sup>14</sup>, Moravian<sup>15</sup>, Cedar Crest<sup>16</sup> and, Lehigh<sup>17</sup> and that, you could go to activities on other campuses. I think I went to Lehigh twice. My best friend from high school was at Cedar Crest so once in a while I would go there or she would come here. But since I didn't have a car I didn't tend to go around to the other campuses much. I know that there were opportunities for course exchange but I never did. There was plenty for me at Lafayette.

**VF:** What was your major and why did you choose it?

**MVD:** I applied premed with a Biology major. I wanted to go to medical school. After taking that psychology course in high school and discovering that I could be premed without majoring

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<sup>14</sup> Muhlenberg College, Allentown, Pennsylvania.

<sup>15</sup> Moravian College, Bethlehem, Pennsylvania.

<sup>16</sup> Cedar Crest College, Allentown, Pennsylvania.

<sup>17</sup> Lehigh University, Bethlehem, Pennsylvania.

in science, I switched to premed/psychology major. Eventually I realized medical school was not for me so I concentrated on psychology and sociology.

**VF:** How did you choose your courses?

**MVD:** Well my freshmen year even though there were no required courses I, took traditional ones--English, calculus, biology, economics, and psychology. You know, pretty standard across the board. In the beginning I was choosing courses because I had a psychology major to fulfill, and I also was looking at courses that would be required for medical school admission.

**VF:** Was there a time in any of your classes where you were the only female?

**MVD:** No.

**VF:** How were your interactions with male faculty?

**MVD:** They were positive I don't think that they were any different than with the male students. I think that they were pleased that the women were here, and they gave the same opportunities to women as to men.

**VF:** What was the male/female ratio?

**MVD:** My freshmen year? One to sixteen.

**VF:** How did that make you feel?

**MVD:** On one hand very special. On the other hand it was very abnormal. I mean, I came from a high school that was fifty/fifty so it was strange.

**VF:** Did you have any mentors within the faculty?

**MVD:** One professor, Bert Cohen, although he never really knew it. I sent him a letter years later telling him. He taught statistics in the Psychology Department and everybody dreaded his courses. I was always really good in math and science and statistics just clicked for me. I loved it. His course helped bring me back from being a careless student who was partying too much to a focused one. On some level he had a profound impact on me because I did really well. So he was a mentor although he never knew it didn't know it at the time.

**VF:** Did you find that there were enough female instructors?

**MVD:** I didn't think about it at the time. It really wasn't an issue for me.

**VF:** What was the emphasis on post-college initiatives at Lafayette? Were women expected to find a husband more so than pursuing upper level education?

**MVD:** No, most of us looked to further education, the same as it was for the men.



**VF:** What did you do right after graduation?

**MVD:** I knew I was going to graduate school in September. I went to Columbia<sup>18</sup> for counseling psychology and rehabilitation.

**VF:** Did you have an advisor or a career services center that helped you prepare for life after Lafayette?

**MVD:** Not that I remember, no.

**VF:** Did you feel adequately prepared then upon graduation?

**MVD:** Yes, I felt well prepared for graduate school.

**VF:** Were there any skills in particular that you developed at Lafayette that helped your post-Lafayette experience?

**MVD:** Yes, how to study and connect academics to real life contributions.

**VF:** Did the male/female ratio at Lafayette prepare you for the workplace? Was it similar or different?

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<sup>18</sup> Columbia University, New York, New York.

**MVD:** Relatively similar.

**VF:** How would you have characterized the politics of Lafayette while you were a Lafayette student compared to what you know or may not know of Lafayette today?

**MVD:** I believe that the students at Lafayette are much more involved today. They're much more involved in issues that affect humanity and are less self-absorbed. I believe the college is much more active in responding to the community and encouraging that in the students.

**VF:** Do you feel that the *Alumni Magazine* is representative of Lafayette College as a whole?

**MVD:** Yes, however it has overlooked the early women. So I am thrilled to hear about this project because I really believe our experience is special. Every time I step foot on the campus I just get this feeling of pride and connection. My Lafayette experience is a very important part of my life and it was a wonderful opportunity to grow and change be part of the first group of women here.

**VF:** What other types of things would you change about Lafayette today?

**MVD:** I would increase the diversity of the student body. Other than that, I cannot think of any changes.

**VF:** How did your degree help you in your career choices?

**MVD:** That's a simple one. Graduating from Lafayette with a solid degree in psychology gave me a strong background for graduate school. The experimental psychology courses were intensive and unique. I went to Columbia and left there with two masters degrees. After graduate school I started working in a mental health center. That was my true love, working with that population. I spent many years working in community mental health until I started to work for the Division of Mental Health in the state of New Jersey. And worked there for seventeen years. My last position was as a regional administrator. My staff was responsible for working with the mental health centers in the northern part of New Jersey. We developed community programs for individuals leaving the state hospital system. We evaluated the needs of those patients that were in the hospitals and establish comprehensive programs in the community that provided a broad range of social services. I had the opportunity to early retire two and a half years ago and I am currently consulting and training in mental health. And I really feel that it was the education that I got here and the exposure to it that I got here that really helped me do what I wanted to do with my career.

**VF:** Are there any issues from your time as a student that are still topics of conversation now?

**MVD:** I still like to brag about the fact that I was in the first class of women at Lafayette. And people are still impressed by that, you know, because they know Lafayette. My experience at Lafayette made me see that I could take on challenges and that I could lead. That played out in many other aspects of my life afterwards.

**VF:** Looking back do you think that Lafayette was the ideal place to foster your growth process both academically and socially?

**MVD:** Although it was hard at times, yes. I've never regretted coming here.

**VF:** Did you ever want to transfer while you were a student?

**MVD:** During my sophomore year I probably had a couple of hours where I just felt like so overwhelmed and so confused because I had gotten into the cycle of partying. My grades were poor and I wasn't studying. But I decided to refocus, regroup and stay.

**VF:** Do you feel that the small numbers of women fostered close relationships more so than it would have been fostered at other schools?

**MVD:** Oh yes. It was a whole new experience, and you joined together. Definitely.

**VF:** When you look back now at your overall experience at Lafayette in broad terms what would you want to say about it to sum it all up?

**MVD:** I wish I had the wisdom then that I have now. But I would never want to change the experience. I learned so much about life!

**VF:** As you look back what do you think was your worst memory of Lafayette?

**MVD:** The worst thing... The night Phi Gam burned down. I knew many men who lived there. I just remember being awakened in the middle of the night and rushing outside to make sure everyone was safe.

**VF:** Overall what was your best experience?

**MVD:** I really loved the classroom environment, even though it took me a while to appreciate it! I loved being in an atmosphere with other people who were intelligent and inquisitive. I had to stretch my limits to do well. Those are some of my fondest memories, being in the classroom and just feeling challenged.

**VF:** Is there anything that you would like to say or talk about that I did not address?

**MVD:** No anything that I can think of now.

**VF:** Okay. Well thank you for your participation in our project.

**MVD:** Well you're welcome.