

Allen Reflects on Her First Year

Emily Gamiel, Editor

"Boy, what a wonderful welcoming year it has been." After her first year as president of Meredith College, Dr. Jo Allen recalls that it has been the hospitable acts of the college community, especially those from the students that have defined her time here so far. The college's eighth president remarked, "I think I'm so touched by how responsive the students have really been . . . that was really special." As an alumna, Allen has a special connection with the campus and has a unique insight to the needs of the Meredith.

After Maureen Hartford announced her plans to retire in June 2011, from her Meredith College presidency, Allen remembers hearing the news. She said, "I had gotten a wiff of it through a couple of friends." And although she was excited about the information she learned, Allen described her hesitation in making the transition from her current institution, Widener University, to Meredith. Leaving projects unfinished and work undone was something that Allen wanted to avoid. She explained, "Any time you leave a place that you love, to go to a place that you're pretty sure you love more, it's always a bit of a toss-up."

However, it was Allen's LaGrange, North Carolina roots that tugged on her urgency to apply for the position at Meredith. Although she admitted she could have done more at Widener, she said that the energy would have been better spent at Meredith. After her deliberation, Allen said that "it was not a difficult call, at all." Being closer to her family and rejoining the Raleigh community are things that Allen knew she wanted. She clarified her history with the area: "This is a culture that brought me up, and taught me so much and changed my life. To be able to come back and have whatever kind of impact I might have was just too great to pass up."

Being a graduate of Meredith College is one aspect of Allen's education history that can be interpreted in various ways. On one side of the spectrum, Allen believes that "being an alumna helped me because I certainly understand the culture and the history of Meredith and how revered she is in this community and in this state." She also said that not having

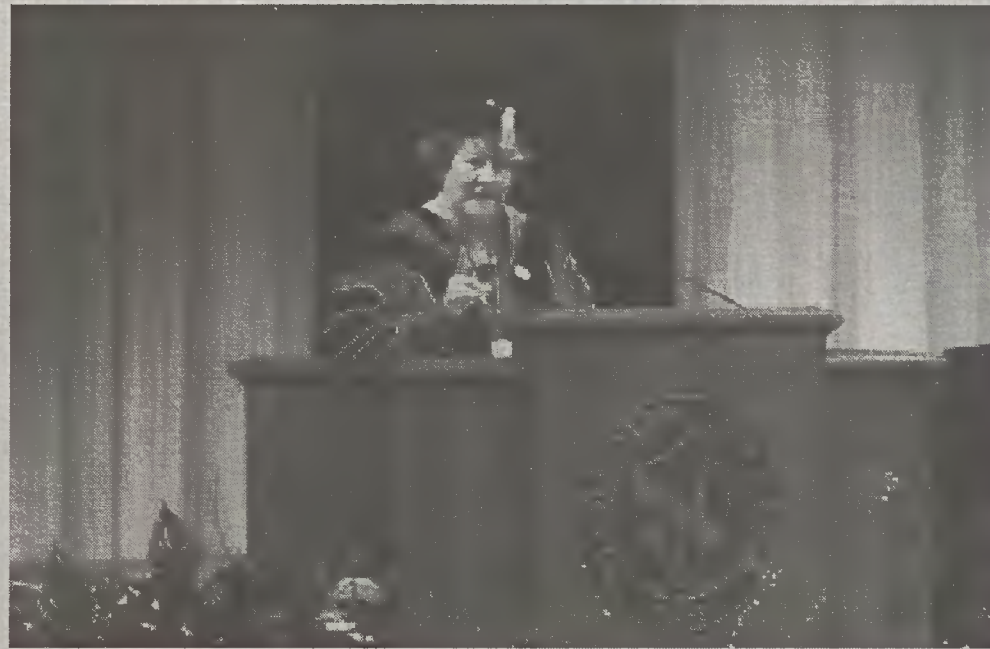


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to learn the high level of respect that Meredith graduates and faculty have was helpful. Having already received an education from Meredith herself, graduating in 1980 with a degree in English, Allen is aware of the community's perception of the college.

On the other hand, Allen explains that it would be easy to think that she was chosen for the position primarily because she was an alumna. She then said, "The board of trustees made it very clear in their deliberation, and they even told me in my second interview, that I was not in the room because I was an alumna." The experience that Allen gained after leaving Meredith was what prepared her for this position. Allen said that going other places and seeing that this college was different from other institutions gives her a unique perspective on how the college needs to grow and change. She explained, "When you see things that need to change, it's always hard to figure out how to deliver that message because you don't want to come in tossing matches." She continued, "It's given me a reminder of having some patience and being respectful of the incredible goodness and excellence that is already here."

One thing about the college that caught Allen's attention throughout her first year was Meredith's relentless efforts to get things right. Allen

commented on the Meredith community, saying she believed that it is "very reflective on decisions that [it] make[s] . . . it's very much the thing that I noted early on." In comparison to other large universities that are often consumed with athletic programs, Allen said, "Here, it's about the college."

In her first year back, Allen noticed changes on the campus. After seeing Meredith from the outside for the past 30 years, she described coming back and walking through all of the buildings as "beautiful." In particular, she pointed out the organic garden and the Meredith Autism program playground.

A noticeable change that Allen noted was the addition of traditions since her time at the college. In comparison with current times she says, "They seemed manageable when I was a student." Allen recalled going through the freshly painted tunnel and pointing out illustrations alluding to traditions that she wasn't familiar with. She admitted, "I was just asking earlier, 'what is 12th night?' and 'this Fire and Water dinner?' We had neither of those traditions when I was here." She added, "They are all great, but there are a lot more traditions now than there were when I was here." In addition to the added traditions, Allen also explained a dif-

ference in the student population as a whole.

The diversity of students is something that Allen said has "improved tremendously" since she was a student. Allen expressed her satisfaction with the emphasis she believes the college makes on having a diverse group of women in attendance. She remembers her senior year at Meredith and said, "I actually went back through my yearbook and I think there was only one African American in my class that was photographed." She also said that she didn't have any international students as fellow classmates.

A constant in the history of Meredith College, according to Allen, is its' ability to find students' strengths, highlight them, and help those students find a way to develop those talents. She said, "I really think that is Meredith's niche." Moving students to the next level is something that Allen says has happened since she was a student, and will continue to happen in the future. She explained, "To me, that is the power of Meredith."

Throughout the experience of her first year, Allen indicates her Inauguration as one of the proudest moments she has had since taking the position months before in June. She remarked that receiving the emblem necklace from students was "very sweet and powerful." Also moving was having her sister by her side to hold the Bible as she was sworn in. Allen even admits that her mother crashed her Inauguration party, "She's 84 and I just loved that." "There have been so many moments that just take your breath away," Allen said, "You just sit there and try to remember them all and make sure you write them down."

Allen said that she will continue to educate as many women as she can during her future years at Meredith. One issue that she concluded with was her wish for tuition to cost "a whole lot less," and to reach out to and educate more students. Allen said that the toughest part is "wanting to do it all for everybody." Despite this, she said that her goal is "doing as much as [she] possibly can, as well as [she] possibly can, for as many people as [she] possibly can."

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