

Confessions of a Meredith Alumna

Chelsea Hershey, Staff Writer

Dr. Jo Allen is a Meredith College alumna, class of 1980. She is also currently serving as president of her alma mater. These are her words.

What were the dorms like?

Very much as they are today. The freshman dorms, however, were Stringfield and Vann; sophomore dorms were Brewer and Faircloth. We lived in Barefoot and Heilman our junior and senior years. We loved that we could rearrange our rooms in the freshman/sophomore dorms but since Barefoot and Heilman were the new dorms, we felt more "uptown" living there. They had more of an apartment feel to them. Of course, that seems silly now with the building of the Oaks, doesn't it?

Was Peace a huge rival?

Not really. Many of our junior and senior classmates, in fact, were transfers from Peace. My own roommate my senior year was a Peace transfer. But you have to remember that Peace was just a two-year college then, so it was rather typical for them to transfer to Meredith.

What was your favorite musical artist?

Boz Scaggs and any beach music group/performer. I always especially liked Jerry Butler and "Cooling Out," a pretty nifty idea for this time of the semester, right?

What was your favorite movie?

I loved "Same Time, Next Year," because it showed the progression of a relationship [in spite of the couple being in an affair!] that was different from any other movie I had seen.

Who was your favorite professor?

So many and I really can't say. They each had strengths that challenged me, taught me, supported me (or, yes, irritated me!). They were all so unique in their approaches to teaching and helping me to learn about myself as well as about the subject matter.

Why didn't you participate in cornhuskin'?

Who said I didn't? I participated all four years!!!

What was your favorite class?

So many....

What were the boy hours?

What are boy hours? We didn't have any! Guys could come into the parlor but nowhere else.

What is your favorite memory from your undergraduate experience at Meredith?

So many, again. But times spent with friends, both on-campus and off have to be at the top of my list. There was such a great sisterhood of support and care as we explored, fell in and out of love, planned our futures, took road trips together. One of my favorite memories is going to Ft. Lauderdale for spring break my junior year with my roommate, suitemate, and good friend. We had a blast and were absolutely exhausted when we returned!

What was the worst fashion trend you followed?

It's funny because so many of our fashions are now YOUR fashions! I challenge you to go through the 1980 yearbook and look at the pictures of the seniors and identify a fashion that is decidedly "awful" today. Maybe I'm just too impressed with my classmates' good taste, but what I see is some really wonderful, time-honored tailored styles: suits, sweaters, jeans/skirts, jewelry, everything.

What are the biggest differences between MC today and your life as an undergrad at MC?

Well, there is the "boy hour" thing. For us, a date arrived at Johnson Hall and we were phoned by the receptionist with the message, "You have a guest in Johnson Hall." Of course, that was before the days of cell phones, too. We also had a hall phone, placed in the center of the hall to which guys had the number, as well as the receptionist, of course. At first, everybody is crazy to answer the phone because it was always guys inviting us to parties. As the semester wore on, though, and we got our own room phones and the guys knew our phone numbers, the

use of the hall phone dwindled—and became more annoying to have to answer. I remember times when the phone would ring for 20 minutes before a girl would yell, "somebody get the phone!"

Academically, I think there are a lot of differences. While Meredith has always been known for the personalized instruction and feedback the students get, I think today's students get a lot more variety in HOW they are taught that is better aligned with how they learn. So, undergraduate research projects, service learning, cooperative education and internships and even study abroad were not so common when I was in school. I think that most students today would say they can't imagine a college experience that didn't include at least one of these means of active learning and engagement.

Did you play a sport? If so, what?

I played volleyball and basketball in junior high and high school, but not here. I wasn't good enough, to be honest.

Were you in a play? If so, what?

I did try out for a play or two but didn't make the cut. I was always amazed by the quality of the acting and musical and dance skills of some of my friends and classmates.

Discuss sisterhood.

Well, sisterhood for me started with my real sister, who is two years older than I am and the person I credit with my coming to Meredith. She's a phenomenal woman (just retired as the founding principal for a new K-8 school in eastern North Carolina) and role model, and I've always considered her my best friend. So it was very special to be "adopted" by her friends—roommate and suitemates and other friends—when I got here (and, actually, even before I came to Meredith!).

I was equally happy to find that same kind of sisterhood existed in my friendships with my classmates, roommates, and suitemates. The women were great about studying together and playing together. It was my first real understanding of the reality behind "work hard/play hard" that I think characterizes a balanced life.

Most of all, I am sad that some young women never consider a women's college because they believe we are drama queens or "mean girls"—nothing could be further from the truth. I feel a remarkable connection to my friends from Meredith and will for the rest of my life.

How many classmates do you still keep in touch with?

Well, I can't tell you the exact number but it's a good number. I've been especially pleased to hear from so many over the course of my announcement and installation as new president. It's encouraging, too, that so many of us may not call/visit/write routinely but when we do, it's as if no time has gone by at all. One of my roommates and I were in touch through birthday and Christmas cards for 17 years before we actually saw each other again. Shortly after that, I spent a year in her city and it was a marvelous reconnection that has lasted another 15 years. That's the power of the Meredith connection—a lasting, loving, supportive friendship.

What was your biggest whine & gripe as a student here?

Probably that the academic rigors were, well, rigorous! It was tough keeping up with reading, papers, memorizations, projects, etc. But it was so important to be prepared for classes so your friends didn't have to cover for you in class discussions when you weren't prepared to participate. And you certainly didn't want to lose points on work for turning it in late.

Were there any crazed geese or squirrels when you stayed on campus?

I don't remember any geese, but we've always had squirrels. I remember a squirrel getting into a girl's room one time—made us all crazy with laughter!

What were your favorite traditions?

I certainly loved Cornhuskin'—just as much the coming together of all the students as the skits themselves. I was a freshman when Alice in Wonderland was produced, so I felt a bit confused by it. It was a little tough not knowing the whole story and who the actors were. We had Stunt but that wasn't a big deal for my class, as I recall. And the "rush" for Phis and Astros was a big tradition.

Did you study abroad?

Unfortunately, no. And that's a huge regret on my part. When I was here, I knew only a couple of students who studied abroad (my roommate being one of them). I don't think we realized what a profound impact it had on learning and development at that time.

How was the food in Belk Dining Hall?

The food then, like now, was great. BDH was known for its Sunday lunches of roast beef, and families would often come after church to eat lunch at Meredith. We all still remember the famous yeast rolls that Meredith served.

Where did you find yourself on Friday nights?

Most often I went out with friends—to movies, fraternity parties, and occasionally on dates.

Did you go to any formals?

I went to a couple of fraternity formals, but I'm not sure Meredith hosted any here.

Did you prefer morning or afternoon classes?

Morning—definitely! I loved that I could go to class, study while my roommate and suitemates were in class in the afternoon, and then have my evenings free for hanging out with friends, watching t.v. or whatever.

What color was your cap and gown?

The same as everybody's everywhere at that time: black (yawn!)

Did you live on campus all four years? Where on campus?

I did live on campus all four years: Stringfield, Faircloth, Barefoot, and Heilman, Wonderful, wonderful memories of each!

What was the most trouble you and your girlfriends got into at MC?

Don't be silly. I never got into trouble (and wouldn't tell if I did!)

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