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# 'General' Reunion

## Student Television Veterans Return To the Studio for a Special Episode

Elesha Barnette sat alone Tuesday night, joined only by broken dialogue trickling from small speakers and digitized images of those who sat in a similar chair 10 years ago.

Barnette is editing a special reunion episode of "General College," a collegiate soap opera produced by Student Television. With roughly half of the two-part episode complete, Barnette has several long nights ahead of her to ready the reunion episode for its Feb. 24 premiere at 8:30 p.m.

Her editing marathons are standard operating procedure in the show's history of long hours and dramatic subplots. Created by Adam Reist in 1987 and continued by Jason Lyon until 1990, the show takes college life — which usually puts "Days of Our Lives" to shame anyway — and sends it even further over the top.

Filmed last March at UNC, the reunion episode allowed nine alumni not only to return to UNC but also to celebrate a show that changed many of their lives.

### 'I Can't Believe This is Happening'

When Lyon heard Barnette had revived his show in 2000, he sent her a congratulatory note telling her that if she wanted to incorporate older characters in new plotlines, some were still in the area.

Enter Kimber Holmes, a 1990 alumna who divides her time between pursuing acting in New York and working as an accountant in her parents' Durham business. She rejoined the cast as a way of keeping her acting chops fresh.

Holmes reprised her old character, Amy Fairington, and worked alongside actors 10 years her junior — which caused its share of stress. "When I first shot I was very nervous," Holmes said. "I am this New York trained actor, I'm coming on the show, they're students —

what if they think I suck? I was so freaked out; now I'm like 'whatever.'"

Shortly after Holmes began acting for "General College" again, Lyon and Barnette decided to develop a full-blown reunion episode shot in Chapel Hill, featuring the old cast acting in updated versions of their characters.

To prepare for writing the script and reuniting the cast, Lyon and his friend, "General College" cohort Michele Lawler rewatched every episode, much to Lawler's chagrin. "Courtney was the sweetest, most sugary character ever," she said of her on-screen personality. "Watching me and Billy Crudup, the two of them together were like 'ugh.'"

Lawler and Crudup (of "Almost Famous" fame) played Courtney Daniels and Jason Matthews, the show's interracial addition to the catalog of great love stories — think Luke and Laura meet Spike Lee. Lyon characterized Crudup as a reluctant actor whose passion for the craft grew in his later time with the show. "It's so unlikely he became a professional actor," Lyon said. "He was such a frat boy. He wondered how his frat would react to his doing an interracial storyline."

Crudup wasn't the only former cast member whose schedule wouldn't permit him to join the reunion cast in March. Former MTV staple Dan Cortese ranks among them, as does Adam Reist, who now is the stage manager for "Guiding Light." Many from the cast were disappointed that Margaret Johnson — best known for her line "I can't believe this is happening!" — could not make it.

When all the details were worked out, nine alumni returned: Lyon, now a film and television producer preparing to begin a documentary; Lawler, actress and Web designer; Rhetta Wiley and Maria Earman, both of who are finishing their

doctoral dissertations; Susan Hamaker, freelance Chyron operator; Todd Walker, photographer and designer; Debbie Rubenstein, PBS producer; Rob Vanderberry, who works in sales; and Tessa Blake, producer and documentarian.

### 'Everyone's Married But Me'

During the episode's weekend shoot, the reunited cast revels and regresses. Sesame Street songs, quaint '80s gems and ill-advised plotlines of old ("Nobody really knows why we did that plotline: 'Can I be blind?' 'Sure, why not?'" are conjured up again.

Barnette, however, isn't faring as well. With her assistant producer, Paul Glaser, unavailable, Barnette is making alternate location shoots to accommodate the grey, rainy weather. "It's a little stressful," she says.

Blake takes a break from shooting and settles into a corner in the Carolina Inn's main lobby, the cacophony of a wedding party roaring behind her. The bride and groom flash their smiles and exit. Given Blake hadn't seen many of her fellow, now-married cast members in some time, the topic of personal progression is raised.

"In a way, I feel like the least grown up (of the group) in some ways, because I'm pursuing the same thing in the same industry, I'm sort of like basically doing the same thing," Blake said. "Everyone's doing these grown-up things: Maria and Rhetta are pursuing Ph.D. dissertations, Rob's married, Michele's married. Not that marriage is the ... " her voice trails off.

"Fuck! Everyone's married but me! Everyone's married but me, and my father got married five times! I don't care! I don't care!"

Amused at herself, Blake ends her tirade as the wedding party passes through the inn's main lobby. "I don't, actually," she says. "Anyway, it's sort of interesting how we've gotten these earmarks of adulthood, how we've all accumulated them."

Through these earmarks, members of the cast who were less familiar or friendly in the past either rediscovered each other or moved on. Wiley is pleased with the passage of time, as it allows her to enjoy "General College" again.

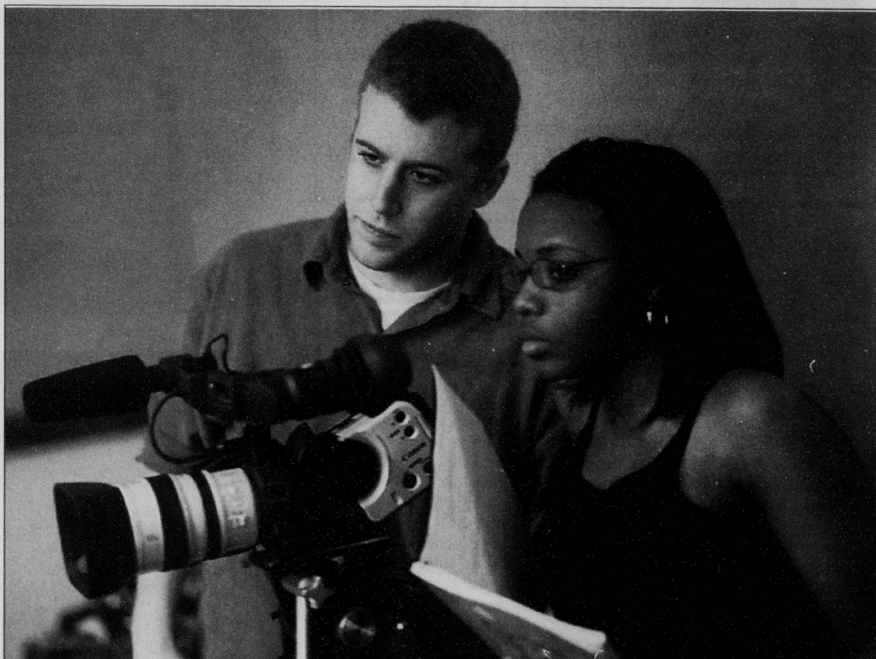
During her original time with the show, personality conflicts arose with Lyon, and eventually her character, Meg Phillips, was recast. "After 10 years, to hear (the cast) get a little bit better was nice," Wiley says. "It was nice to see that we've grown up a bit."

### 'A Rare and Treasured Experience'

Many members of the cast hadn't seen each other in years, but some continued to work together beyond "General College." Blake and Lyon collaborated for five years on the award-winning documentary, "Five Wives, Three Secretaries and Me," and Walker took stills for the film's promotional



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Jason Lyon and Debbie Rubenstein (top) returned to Chapel Hill for the reunion. Assistant Producer Paul Glaser and Producer Elesha Barnette (above) plan one of the weekend's final shots. Lyon, David Townsend and Michele Lawler (left) rehearse a scene. The "General College" reunion episode airs Feb. 24.

material. Blake and Walker reunited for "Pink House," a film written and directed by UNC alumnus Ian Williams. Glaser interned during the filming. Holmes and Lawler speak daily, and Blake and Rubenstein exchange calls occasionally. Both Lawler and Blake describe Lyon as their closest friend. With exceptions, most of the cast met each other through "General College."

In the course of dishing soap to the campus, they formed a community. And a set of life skills. "I did probably 60 percent STV stuff and 40 percent Lab! That was my whole entire life, and I learned more from doing 'General College' and Lab! than I did in any acting class," Lawler said. "Sitting there, learning lines, watching tapes, seeing the mistakes we made — it taught me more than any class I took."

For Blake, the show was her first production work, but more importantly, it formed a well-rounded community. "We had a lot of fun, but somehow we managed to get a really solid education," Blake said. "And that to me is a rare and treasured experience."

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## Think You'll Never See Old Friends Again? The Six Degrees of 'General College' Prove Differently



### Jason Lyon

- Lyon wrote, produced and acted in the show's early days.
- Lyon and Blake met by chance in New York and made the award-winning documentary "Five Wives, Three Secretaries and Me" together.



### Tessa Blake

- The Morehead Scholar played Zoe, the show's resident gossip.
- While working on her next documentary, Blake and UNC alumnus Ian Williams are producing "The Pink House."



### Todd Walker

- Walker played Trevor Throne, a drug dealer who got shot by his girlfriend.
- Working with Blake and Lyon, Walker took photos for "Five Wives" and was a camera operator on "The Pink House."



### Debbie Rubenstein

- Rubenstein's character, Alex, was a rich girl who had multiple personalities and a heart of gold.
- Working with Bill Moyers at PBS, Rubenstein and Blake exchange calls occasionally.