

Norfolk Town Meeting 10-16-06

Pat Harriss Holden '67

Norfolk/Tidewater Visit—a non-journalist's long and biased report Ginger Worden, Skip Kughn, Heather Garnett, Lucy Hooper (trustee)

On Monday October 16 at the Vintage Kitchen in Dominion Towers, about 100 guests were warmly greeted at 7 pm by RMWC Staff and also representatives of the PEC, who handed out information about the web site and carrot pins at the door. The majority of the people took the pins, though not all understood what the campaign was for. Joan Stumborg and I placed our Homecoming Parasols by the front door. I showed pictures to those who were interested as a follow up to the article the Alumnae Office published. The College furnished nice little brownie and apple crisp squares, along with coffee and wine. I don't drink, but later began wishing I did.

Before the talks began, we sang "Where the River," which everyone joined in beautifully. Randy Ferraro had furnished the words. I propped against my water glass the picture of Elaine St. Vincent and Dr. Quillian, taken from a recent visit. Those two smiling broadly into the camera made me smile, along with others at our table. Heather introduced Ginger who began speaking at 8. She began by telling the background of the decision, options and details of the study that stated "either fix Lynchburg or go coed." (Odd since Hampden-Sydney, Hollins, Sweet Briar all thrive in tiny villages and Liberty's 10,000 students and the new college Duke is building are enjoying Lynchburg.) She explained the set up of six committees to develop the new school, but stated that they didn't have many alums signed up yet, which produced sarcastic murmurs. She reviewed that we retain 61%, the deep discounting, the international students from 47 countries (no one questioned why so many). Global honors program was mentioned and that there is a committee to flesh that out (which is a good thing, since no one seems to know what on earth that means, much less how noname will have a reputation for this to draw students when it hasn't even developed or tested the program yet.) Ginger asserted that admitting men would bring 17 year old women so that the students would have more of a social life and not transfer. Someone at our table asserted: "There are other reasons why students transfer than for lack of men."

Name change was discussed and alums registered extreme distaste for any new name, which Ginger said that she understood the pain it would cause and how difficult this is. Alums made the point that the no name place will have no status for resumes, and that 115 years of academic prestige will be thrown away. New names already mentioned (Conway, Quillian, Randolph-Macon Institute for Global Studies). Alums at our table said that while they deeply respected Dr. Quillian, the name has no significance outside of our community. Ginger explained that John D'entremont had done research (his book?) on Conway, who was an abolitionist. Ginger stated that she understood that both Randolph and Macon had unsavory reputations. (I think the Randolphs are "good stock," actually!) This time she did not employ the analogy that it is "just like when a woman marries and takes on her husband's last name for her new name, as she would have to be informed that this sudden "arrangement/change," unlike marriage, is not by mutual consent. Generally when a loved one dies, no one drops that dead person's last name.) Ginger encouraged us to send in name suggestions. Judging from the looks of people staring down at our table, with their hands holding their faces and their elbows digging into the table cloth, I doubt many names will be sent.

Ginger was told by an impassioned alum how this move by the board had split apart our RMWC community/family. "Was it worth it?" she demanded to know. She said she was sorry. Heather

implored us not to abandon our school, that the Alumnae Association would be there for us and would have the bulletins. People at our table retorted: "Not like the board has abandoned our school." Ginger stated that she expected "a handful of men" would be enrolled this coming year. A young man asked why would any man want to come to a school that was for women when the Admissions people complain that women don't want to come, and there is no name and the global honors program is not well planned or articulated, and the school is supposedly on the brink of financial ruin with the Endowment drawing down..." Ginger insisted we have the potential to be great, etc. if we will just behind this new plan. ("Not likely," I heard, all around me.)

Ginger said she didn't want any alums interfering with the college recruiting fairs, as had been reported..

A distinguished older gentleman rose to say that "as someone who had been involved with prep schools up and down the east coast," he felt that RMWC's problem was in the Admissions Office... He cited Bert Hudnall's articulate letter about Admissions shortcomings...and suggested that Admissions people must think that just giving a book award is recruiting, but it is NOT. Relationships with high school counselors are not personally cultivated. The failure and scarcity of marketing was generally repeated. An alum in advertising said that the school had not branded itself and marketed its niche. A recent grad defended the Admissions office and said that the Admissions staff "were wonderful" and that she had worked with them as a Gold Key Guide. She said that her freshman year 4 out of twenty freshman on fifth floor Bell transferred first quarter! Yet no one ever asked her in four years what could be done to improve retention, and she would have been glad to give ideas....Other alums expressed frustration at being rebuffed with their offers of help and proven skills. Some expressed great irritation at not being given a chance to raise more money while all the while being told that the college was in top financial shape by word and by print.

One alum asserted that she would rather have been giving the money alums raised so quickly for litigation against this decision to instead give to the school for support. Still others were very angry that the college had the capital campaign, raising the goals with the knowledge that all this coeducation talk was in full swing and by Lucy Hooper's admission, she knew of the "necessity of this decision in April [2006]." The Maier paintings, according to Ginger, will be looked at to see which ones can be "deassessed," (whatever that means, but sounds a lot like "hocked" again). She said that the paintings could be in the school so that math majors who do not have art history links to their studies would see them hanging in the halls as she had when she attended school. She said that lots were in storage anyway and never seen, so they could be sold (I wonder what they will do with the Maier—use it to house the overflow of students that they want to raise to 1100??? I wonder what the Maier family feels about this. I am clear what the community and those who gave bequests think about this,as well as the art community.) She said she is challenging the Maier to" think as entrepreneurs." Very mystical indeed.

Emily Gill Mills stated that when we don't like a teacher, we don't run away because it only hurts ourselves, so stay connected. When we have a loss is not good to make a drastic change...and try to stay connected. At that point an alum said that we were told directly by a board member that they didn't care how the alumnae felt anyway. Three alums (one in late twenties, two of whom were in their early 70's,one of whom referred to change she had witnessed as normal during her years) at various times urged us all to get on board and support this plan. Yet the consensus was that this process was too sudden. Ginger said that the board had "been on its journey for a long time,

studying, etc." and the immediate response was "Well, we haven't because you didn't tell us when you knew." "So why didn't you postpone your decision to let us get on board, to work together?" was the follow up question. The answer was the same about not wanting to confuse applicants about a college that will be going coed in three more years, for marketing. (This answer makes no sense to anyone I have yet asked, and if it confuses applicants so much, they probably shouldn't be applying anyway.) Shock, outrage, sadness were generally the emotions expressed about this decision.

The "Strategic Plan" was roundly assailed —both at the time and between attendants sitting away from the podium, among themselves. "Thrown together" was an oft repeated phrase. Ginger and also Lucy insisted that the Board had done a lot of work to establish that this would save our school, that they love our school. (However no one asked: "So what happens if you are wrong, if it does NOT save our school?") Ginger reiterated several times that we have a bright future and that we "can be a great college" to which a respondent said: "We already ARE a great college." Ginger held out for the same academic excellence with men there. (Counter to research actually, and now men's enrollment in college has waned anyway!) Ginger was asked what the living presidents thought of this decision. She said she would not answer for them, though we do know that she knew that Dr. Spivey and Dr. Quillian are opposed. Ginger referred to a "too rich faculty/student ratio." (I think that is a major reason why most women choose RMWC and have in the past...and I fear this ratio is about to get "even richer." She talked about doing this change now "from a position of strength," to which our entire table began murmuring in strong opposition. She felt it wiser to make this change now rather than later, when faculty would be leaving, enrollment dwindling, and deferred maintenance was occurring would be the wrong time to make the change. Lucy Hooper spoke with much emotion about how painful this had been for her, how when she realized (IN APRIL) that she had also concluded that the coed alternative would be the answer, she sobbed. She said that she had read all the communications and invited anyone to have input to her or questions. She reiterated how she felt this plan would save our school. Otherwise, as Ginger said, we "would go down with our flags flying." (At least with the former school we did have flags and knew what the flags stood for) "Where did they (SBC and Hollins) get it right and we got in wrong?" "Why did SBC turn down the suggestion from A & S to go coed and we did not?" were never answered to anyone's satisfaction at my table.

More questions around why could Hollins, Sweetbriar and Mary Baldwin do what we could not, though "we're smarter!" Ginger said that she doubted they would be able to continue to be single sex, made references to the differences between the SBC and RMWC (they reinstated the May Court and have cheerleaders for Hampden Sydney (actually Longwood does that last I knew) and if it takes any of that to remain viable, I say so what. I do not believe she or anyone outside that institution has the right or qualifications or information to disparage our sister schools' commitment and lasting power. They at least have the dedication to mission and attractive marketing which has produced results which have kept them from this quagmire.)

It was pointed out that to spring this kind of decision on alums, when they were told that the board had not made up its mind violated the honor code...that the person felt betrayed by this deceit,e.g., "acting as if they hadn't already made up their minds." That is when the one alum stood and defended "our mother" (basically saying stick by "our mother" right or wrong, even if she did make some mistakes and make us mad). Ginger responded by assuring that she bore responsibility for how it was handled because she wanted to first be sure the faculty was behind it and needed to present it to them so they could support it. The marketing people had advised them to get names

for this college so they could market it. The question was asked: "Why didn't you market to women with whatever marketing agency you used." Skip said they had used four agencies with good reputation in 30 years. "Sure didn't work," came unanimously from our table.

At one point someone said: "is that your final answer...is there anything we can do to turn this around, to go back to the drawing board to attract engineering women, for example... The answer was basically: " no." (because of the "confusion it would cause in marketing.") KGB's exorbitant salary, the overstaffing and underfunctioning of different departments with multiple administrators, were not discussed.

"Is it worth it, to have our community torn apart?" was answered with "We can be an extraordinary college."

At 10, we adjourned, but people went up to the staff to ask further questions. I left because I didn't have any questions that were not addressed and felt that the "twenty things" from the PEC very well said what I would have wanted them to know. Besides I was tired of listening and writing as fast, as I could. The meeting dwindled to an end and I later read a post from one of the proponents for the change that said: "It was an interesting meeting, but I left sad." She was in good company. I tucked my picture of Dr. Quillian and Elaine St. Vincent back into my pocket and pushed away from the table. Then I turned off my Homecoming Parasol's lights, folded it up, and made my way to the car in the company of a wonderful recent graduate whom I had never met, who now lives here. We hugged goodbye.

I remember being sent to the end of the line in sixth grade when I refused to tell Miss Mary Frances Parker I had a good time in her ballroom dancing class. That night I never thanked my hostesses because I felt kind of sick at my stomach from what I did and did not hear.

My editorial comments along with having scribbled as fast as I could for two straight hours will also tell you why I am not a journalist, in case you ever foolishly wondered! I don't feel the need to demonize anyone...am just feeling the tidal wave of cognitive dissonance with the board's brand of "logic" coming from the mouths of very nice and apparently well intended people who claim to be feeling our pain but continue plodding the same path-- without the benefit of substantial valid input--crazy making. It all makes me very tired, as you must be if you have somehow managed to read this far.

Respectfully submitted anyway, aware that this is not a perfect report..
Pat Harriss Holden '67