

The Women of '72 – Tales From the Frontier

Daryl English and Janet Reyerling Howard

Transformative change was coming at Princeton – ready or not for everyone involved.

IN THE FALL OF 1968 Princeton welcomed its last all-male freshman class. Fifteen women joined the men one year later as sophomores – a mere four months after Princeton decided to go coed – and the rest followed in the fall of 1970 as juniors. Two former '73 women also joined our ranks through accelerated three-year programs. Our grand total came to 64 women, joining 850 male classmates on the official Class of '72 rolls.

Hailing from across the U.S. and far beyond – including Czechoslovakia, Israel and Japan – we came from a wide range of backgrounds and educational experiences. Some among us were the first in our families to attend college, while others were the first women from long Princeton legacies. We transferred from big universities and small women's colleges, some renowned, others less so.

While several of us report initial opposition from concerned or puzzled parents – morphing without exception into unqualified pride by the time we graduated – most of us were cheered on by our families. As **Mary Wadsworth Darby** recalls: “When I received the long-hoped for ‘YES’ letter from Princeton admissions, I was thrilled! My family too...my Harvard '30 father said, ‘Well, I always thought I might have a Harvard son, but I never dreamed I would have a Princeton daughter!’”

Being among the very first women at Princeton made us pioneers by definition, though most of us didn't think of ourselves that way at the time. That includes **Vera Marcus**, one of only two African-American (her preferred term) women who graduated in our class – already a seasoned trailblazer, coming to an “all-male Princeton” from a recently all-white Birmingham, Alabama high school undergoing forced desegregation.

Like most pioneers, we were largely motivated by personal concerns, rather than abstract or symbolic agendas, in choosing Princeton in transition. Some of us were seeking courses and majors that were unavailable at our previous institutions. Others were looking for a more demanding academic environment, more compatible companions, or broader horizons.

While the slogan “Bring Back the Old Princeton” hovered somewhere in the background, mainly among alumni, it rarely intruded into our lives. Most of the male students were very welcoming, and some played a major role in making their new classmates feel comfortable at the University. Stevenson, Terrace, Charter, and Cap and Gown opened their doors early to women, providing a home away from home. Wilson College (now “Frist College”) and the Princeton Inn provided comfortable social environments for forming friendships.

Dotty Jannarone Kemper fondly recalls good times at the Princeton Inn: “Jan, Lizz, Mimi, Claire, Dibby, Sandy, Aida, Ellen, Melissa, Sarah: we had a great wing. Duncan and Peter kept us sane. Gene kept us thinking. Gordie was always available for TV quiz shows at lunch. Lamar, a senior, hosted game nights in his room next to the second-floor cookie-baking kitchen and seemed to be in charge of the whole place.”



*Daryl English, Holly Lovejoy, Judith White
celebrating graduation*

Others found themselves in more isolating environments, at least initially. **Patricia Bowe Romines** (known back then as P.B.) recalls moving into her assigned room on the fifth floor of Edwards Hall — “It was the ‘singlet’ of single rooms”—and not seeing another woman anywhere. The contrast with her freshman move-in at Wellesley couldn’t have been more stark. “My memory of my first day at Princeton is this: it was lonely.... But experience told me that things would get better – and they did.”

Retro Encounters

Princeton in the early 1970s was inarguably in transition, and there were blips – some of which would make the young women of today run for a safe room or a bull horn. Let’s face it. It’s stressful to walk across campus amidst cat calls from drunken male undergraduates hanging out of windows. And no one relishes fending off unwanted invitations.

Lizz Plater-Zyberk, the first woman to graduate from the architecture school, recalls convivial late nights working in the design studio, which made one memorable proposal all the more jarring. Working on her submission to a journal showcasing the work of students and faculty, a grad student initiative, she recalls, “I was approached by the several editors who asked me, in all seriousness, if I would consider being the centerfold of the publication. I declined as politely as I could, and the publication appeared without that embellishment.”

The professors’ reactions to us varied, with incidents ranging from the abusive to the sublime. Let’s turn to the dastardly first. One of our classmates was visited in her dorm room by a professor wanting to have sex with her, prompting her to change her major. A junior paper advisor informed one of his female advisees that he would never give a woman better than a C. He made good on that promise in at least two cases, maybe deservedly, maybe not. We’ll never know.

Then there were middling annoyances. Like professors persisting in addressing a coed class as “gentlemen,” as **Jackie Ariail** recalls from her American Lit class in the fall of 1970. Or calling out women conspicuously, as **Carol Rahn** remembers: “Walking into the first session of a course, late and rain drenched, and the professor greeting me, ‘Ms. Rahn, I presume?’ He apologized after class for calling attention to me and said the faculty had been counselled not to do things like that.” Others recall professors expressing surprise when a woman got a good grade, making fun of women in general when lecturing on “The Wives of Bath,” or advising one of us not to take certain science courses because “you won’t do well.” (**Diana Foster** proved the lie to that one.)



*Priscilla Stumm, Marta Richards '73,
Amanda Eggert Stuckenberg*

Faculty “Honor Roll” Candidates

“Being a pioneer in any endeavor has its challenges. The beauty of retrospect is I can now put them in perspective. We early women were invited to help in a transition. The institution wanted us. Yes, [there were annoyances], but there were many people who did support us, and we helped make the transition a success. Our surviving made us and Princeton stronger.” Diana Foster

But for every faculty misstep, there were many more professors who provided invaluable guidance and mentorship. Professors Weiss, Kestner, Swann, Ludwig, Sueoka, Baker, Wilson, Dilliard, Thompson, Chen and Tang were among those receiving call-outs 50 years later. As **Ann Sease Monoyios** attests, “The music department was fantastic from the beginning, welcoming coeducation, taking its two new undergraduate women as seriously as any male classmates.” To its further credit, the department immediately added women’s voices to the Glee Club and rebuffed Harvard when it wouldn’t allow Princeton’s

women to sing its school song at a football concert.

Helena Novakova, who grew up behind the Iron Curtain in Czechoslovakia, recalled the incredible kindness, dedication and extraordinary mentorship provided by Russian Studies Professor Billington, who in her words, "...helped me transition to free thinking and beyond through counsel, advice and guidance till almost the last days of his life." **Janet Reyerling Howard** remembers the generosity of Professor Bates, the chair of the Romance Language department, for whom she worked as part of her financial aid package. Professor Bates not only arranged a job in France for her; he wrote a check to help cover expenses, making it possible for her to fulfill a lifelong dream.

An Array of Experiences and Shared Bonds as Transfers

Needless to say, there was no universal "women's experience," and reactions varied depending on personalities and circumstances. For some, it felt uncomfortable to be the only woman in a class or department. For others, the largely male environment didn't seem all that different from earlier experiences, or simply didn't faze them. Being called out at precepts to express the "women's point of view" was a common complaint. Yet **Dorothy Grouse Fontana** put a more positive spin on the experience: "Whenever I talked in class I felt like I was being judged, not for my ideas, but for whether co-education was a success. It made me think before speaking, but also gave me a sense of accomplishment when my ideas were welcomed. I actually had professors seeking me out to join their classes because they wanted a 'woman's perspective.'"

For many of us the most difficult part of the Princeton experience derived from transferring, rather than from gender. We entered midway, at a time when academic demands were building fast, with junior independent work looming on the immediate horizon. And we had to plunge in headfirst without the benefit of the academic experience, acculturation, familiarity with place and process, and friendships that our male colleagues had acquired during their first two years. It was challenging. Many of us walked around in a kind of blur, trying to figure things out as best we could and missing opportunities along the way. As **Meggan Moorhead**, a psychologist in her professional career, put it: "Knowing what I know now, I would have looked for a psychotherapist to guide me through the waves and waves of complexity and newness; not academic, that part was fine."

A University Unprepared...and Finding Our Way

That brings us to one of the most common laments: lack of institutional support. Princeton wasn't quite ready for us. Yes, there was an early reception at the Faculty House, and maybe a meeting with the Dean of Students during the two years, but there was no detailed orientation or attempt to help us learn what we would have absorbed by osmosis had we been at Princeton from the start. Guidance in navigating the system was pretty much limited to the distribution of a list of the 12 women's bathrooms on the campus.

The effects of the administration's hands-off approach are evident in **Helene Fromm's** regrets years later about not finding her way to the *Daily Princetonian* staff, despite an "abiding interest in politics and writing." She likely speaks to similar experiences for many of us in commenting on that lost opportunity: "It reflected not only the academic and social pressures of entering Princeton as a junior... but also the fact



Janet Howard, Sandy Dodd, Lizz Plater-Zyberk at graduation

that to a great extent the women in our class were dropped into the university and largely expected to navigate campus life on our own.... More organized guidance would have certainly helped us negotiate other opportunities beyond academics."

Work-study to help pay tuition and fees was another fact of life for many of us, which combined with academics further impeded pursuit of those opportunities. We nonetheless participated during our too-short years in a surprising range of extracurricular activities. Triangle Club, Theatre Intime and McCarter Community Theater. Princeton Glee Club and singing in campus bands. Student Volunteers Council. Tutoring in Trenton and political canvassing for the '70 elections. Campus bridge competitions. At least two of our members became trailblazers for Princeton women's athletics. With Margie Gengler '73, Helena won the doubles event in Princeton's first-ever showing in women's competition, at the Eastern Intercollegiate tennis tournament in 1970. **Mary Darby** was a driving force in getting Princeton women on the water, serving as coxswain for the first women's crew.

Many among us have expressed regret that we knew so few of our fellow women classmates as students. That was hardly surprising, given our very small numbers and the fact that we were widely scattered among different academic departments, dormitories and dining venues. There was no forum to bring us together. "An opportunity missed," as **Carol Rahn** put it.

Serendipity at our 45th

Events at the 45th Reunion provided a catalyst for changing that. On that Saturday morning, 16 of us shared life stories at a women's brunch, while sheltering from the only rains that fell on that reunion. Later that day we marched in the sunny P-rade behind a new "1972 Women" banner, cheered and applauded along the entire route by classes with increasing numbers of women. It was a deeply emotional experience for those of us who were there, the first time many in our small band of "pioneering" women experienced such universal appreciation.

Reflections on those events and emotions eventually inspired creation of the Women's Pages on our class website, which became the nucleus of a still-growing Women of '72 network. **Daryl English** took the lead on that initiative and serves as our editor and chief cheerleader.

And here we are now, 50 years after graduation. Looking back, many of us now express appreciation and gratitude for the unique gift of our Princeton experience:

- *The highlight of my life.*
- *Princeton helped make me the woman I am today.*
- *I was happy and enriched.*
- *It changed my life forever, and for the better.*
- *I never considered myself a pioneer (though I did have a long skirt straight out of Little House on the Prairie);*
- *I considered myself fortunate.*

In sharing our unique experiences as women at a unique time in Princeton's history, it seems we have largely, and fondly, come to view ourselves more simply – as fellow Princetonians. And as fellow Princetonians we also uniquely experience the march of time together. **Claudia Tesoro** likely speaks for all of us in recalling her perceptions from the Class of 1921 50th reunion in 1971, where she worked as an undergraduate volunteer:

It felt like I was doing anthropological fieldwork. I couldn't believe the cadre of gray-haired old men, in orange and black jackets, who'd come back to Princeton to reminisce with each other after 50 years. An alien species. I'd never seen anything like it, anywhere, in any context. They seemed absolutely ancient, yet energetic, happy, and visibly loyal to Princeton and each other. I never dreamed I might one day find myself in a similar position, but here we all are.

Acknowledgements ...and for the Archives

Daryl and Janet want to thank the Women of '72 who contributed to this story by participating in "memory excavation" Zoom sessions, sending us their written recollections and reflections, or submitting them as very thoughtful responses to the Women of '72 survey. More than half of the women of our class shared their memories and musings. All are preserved unabridged in our Women's Pages on the Class of '72 website, for all classmates to share.

The inspirational stories of two of our members, **Helena Novakova** and **Vera Marcus**, are also featured in *All Her Power*, a 2020 Lewis Center for the Arts theatrical production celebrating 50 years of coeducation at Princeton.

A short version of the *All Her Power* film dedicated to their stories can be viewed on the Class of '72 website.

Christmas on Prospect Street

Janet Howard

CAP AND GOWN CLUB PROVIDES a glowing example of the incongruities of the time. Cap was a pioneer in its own right – one of the first Prospect Street clubs to open its doors to women. Seven women in our class joined that first year. That's more than ten percent – probably the closest thing we had to a female critical mass! The guys were great, the atmosphere was warm and welcoming, and one would have thought that the club always had female members. Then there was the Christmas party. As one eye-witness reported:

We were partying away in the haze of smoke and beer that accompanied parties back then, looking forward to the holidays, when what to my wondering eyes should appear but a nearly naked woman emblazoned with circles of green and yellow day-glow paint. At first I thought I was seeing things. (It was after all quite dark in the room and the booze was flowing.) But no, there she was gyrating away in all her glory. It was, I learned, the club's Christmas tradition and, whoops, someone had forgotten to change it.

The evening did not end well. In fact, something between a chill and a freeze descended on 61 Prospect Avenue.

When the semester resumed, the leadership convened a meeting to address the issue. There were, as could be expected, some earnest and heartfelt complaints, but the ice finally dissolved into laughter when one of the more worldly members took to the floor to express her disgust. She had, she announced disdainfully, visited many strip clubs with her parents and had seen many strippers. BUT NEVER HAD SHE SEEN SUCH A TACKY ONE.

Life returned to normal and, as far as I know, Cap & Gown has never had another stripper. At least not a tacky one.



Women of '72 in the 45th P-Rade