

A STORY from Betty L. Shotton, A&S 1974, A Co-Education Pioneer

My experience as part of the first class of women admitted to the University in 1970 stands out as the most significant transformative experience of my life.

I entered as a young, incredibly naïve 18-year-old from Lynchburg, Virginia. I had little knowledge or experience with sexism, gender discrimination, and misogyny. Nor did I have any thought of what was on the horizon as being part of this groundbreaking first class of young women.

I was raised to be a housewife, a mother, and if for some reason, Mr. Right did not show up by the time I graduated...a teacher. In high school I was a high achiever in academics and sports. I made top grades, I was in the National Honor Society, and on the varsity tennis team.

I don't recall any discussions with parents or other adults about career or professional possibilities post college graduation, outside of the default teacher route.

Naïve would be an understatement for my state of being in September of 1970 when I walked into a new dorm that housed these new co-eds. I quickly observed that there was only one shower stall for 10 girls, and a urinal in the bathroom...an early inkling of things to come.

I have many stories from those first years at UVA ...good and bad. But overall...was there sexism? Absolutely...an all-male school for over 150 years, a southern, conservative culture, a school steeped in all male traditions and societies, of course there was sexism and resistance to women.

Was there gender discrimination? Absolutely... clubs, sports and extracurricular activities were all male. There was very little set up for women nor do I remember any of the men eagerly reaching out for our inclusion.

Misogyny? Unfortunately, yes...my experiences with that were mostly from old time faculty who resented having women in their classes. One in particular was outright hostile. That was the hardest thing to navigate, because it was a threat to my being able to succeed in academics.

Upon reflection, the many challenges I (and my fellow pioneers) faced, prepared me for what would be a long professional career in business and aviation that more often than not, had me being the only woman in the room.

My experiences as a pioneer for co-education at UVA provided me with an ideal environment to get a taste of and learn to navigate what would be a lifelong road of discrimination and sexism.

I have no complaints, only gratitude.

The trajectory of my life has occurred during the rise of women as equals; the integration and inclusion of women into the workforce, politics, decision making.

I have repetitively had to decide if I would sink or swim against unfair oppositional forces.

I am grateful that I had these challenges and faced adversity at a young age at UVA. Those at UVA who decided to go forward with co-education and created the playbook for what it would look like, knew it would take a certain kind of young woman to face the challenge. They were careful about selection and felt that I and my fellow pioneers were up to the task. And we were! We pulled off co-education in a few short years with courage, creativity and success.

Yes, our University has a history of gender and racial discrimination. But more importantly, our University is founded on and has held on to great integrity, high ideals, and time tested values of goodness that have served it well during turbulent times.

I learned fundamental and valuable lessons from the best and will always thank my lucky stars that I was a part of and contributed to one of the greatest cultural transformations in UVA's history.