

Founders' Day Remarks May 17, 2019 (accompanied by slides in the live presentation)
By Kathy Nekton

Good Morning Exeter! It has been eleven years since I have been a part of this community and it is not lost on me that assemblies are often a time when many wish they were somewhere else doing something way more important. So, my challenge is to make these next few minutes worth your time! And trust me, that is a challenge, particularly because I've just learned that attendance is being taken and now both students and faculty are a bit cranky!

Let me begin by expressing my gratitude to the Alumni Association, The Trustees, Principal Rawson and all who have worked to make this day happen. I am especially happy to be here the year we all recognize Elizabeth Phillips as an integral founder of Phillips Exeter. How fitting that the pluralization of the Founders' Day Award happens as we approach the 50th year of coeducation.

No one gets to this point in life without considerable help. I, of course, am grateful to those who showed me the way—my family—a sister and brother who set the bar high; my three children who literally grew up in Love Gym, were gym rats, and tolerated parents who worked 6 and 7 days a week; and my husband who has helped me be the best teacher, coach and person by his stellar example.

And there are others. These are people who appear bigger than life, who initially intimidate a young teacher, but whose wisdom and connection with young people invites emulation. The following are individuals who impacted me in enormous ways. These are names you may recognize because your reference of them may be as **a room, a track, a road, or a pool**. The actual person may be lost to you because most have passed on or retired and gone from your daily lives.

Have you eaten or had a meeting in the Seabrooke Room in Elm Street Dining Hall?

Photo of Ted Seabrooke

That's Ted Seabrooke. He was Chairman of the Physical Education Department and the person who hired me in 1973. He was an extraordinary wrestling and lacrosse coach. He was instrumental in integrating girls into the physical education programs and creating new female interscholastic teams.

Photo of the field hockey team

(And did you know that everyone had to wear gym-issue clothes? Greys for boys and red striped shirts and red polyester shorts for the girls! Apparently, Ted was not a fashionista!)

Have you ever set foot on the Ralph Lovshin Outdoor Track?

Photo of Ralph Lovshin

Ralph was a master at his craft. He coached cross-country and track and field for more years than I can recall. He also won more New England championships in both sports than could be counted. He was notorious for “stealing” athletes from other sports because he had an eye for the success a young person would have in track, and his athletes loved him. But what I remember most was seeing him sitting on a bench at the end of the day and when asked what he was doing, he answered, “I’m looking at my roster and I’m making sure I spoke to each of my athletes today in order to be sure I helped them.”

Have you ever traveled out “Hammy’s Way”? That’s the road along the river that takes you out to the stadium.

photo of road sign

photo of Hammy Bissell

Hamilton Bissell was a long-time, beloved member of the Admissions Office. When Hammy’s granddaughter enrolled at Exeter, she played varsity field hockey. Hammy was retired at this point and every day he would get on his bicycle and come out to watch practice. Even after his granddaughter graduated, he still supported all the teams on his way out to the field hockey field on that road dubbed, “Hammy’s Way”.

One of the extraordinary programs he put in place was what he called The Newspaper Boy Scholarships. He would comb the country for boys (at that time) who had newspaper routes, as he felt such young men had the tenacity and work ethic to be good Exeter students. One of those boys, from North Dakota, was a 10th grader by the name of Charles Rosen. He came to PEA, played water polo and swam and achieved academically. Thirty years later, our daughter was diagnosed with bile duct cancer and needed a liver transplant. Upon arriving at the Minnesota Mayo Clinic, who was there to perform the surgery? Dr. Charles Rosen!

Have you had a chance to swim in the Roger A. Nekton Championship Pool?

photo of Roger Nekton

Does that name sound familiar? Yep, that’s my husband.

Roger was hired to replace an icon in the swimming world. He struggled his first years, holding meets and practices in the three and a half lane pool in the Thompson Gym. When he didn’t immediately beat Andover, the then Principal called him in and threatened to fire him. Fortunately, that didn’t happen. Subsequently, Roger went on to start the girls’ swim team, handing it off to me when I was hired. He also won 34 consecutive, boys’ dual meets against Andover! But more importantly, he connected to his athletes. Remember Dr. Rosen previously mentioned? Chuck admits today that he was the 15th man on a 14-man water polo team. But he credits the hard work, discipline and care of a coach that made him the outstanding transplant surgeon that he is today.

These are people that connected....connected to colleagues, connected to students, connected to staff and lived with purpose.

So many others, but little time to name them all.

How many of us today are frustrated with the state of the world? No matter what one's politics might be, we can be paralyzed by every day events...

Do we move forward, do we make progress, does change happen?

Does what you do matter? Who makes that decision? Is it you, is it others, is it reflected in the institutions to which we belong?

Let's consider some of what has happened on this campus—or at least while I was here.

*** photo of almost all male faculty - year 1972***

This is a photo of the faculty. Look hard. I think I found six women's faces in the crowd. That was 1972, two years after girls were admitted.

photo of small women's group

In 1977, this is how many women were faculty and salaried staff.

In 1982, the numbers had grown.

photo of women in 1982

NOW? You can look around for yourself and enjoy the increased diversity that is Exeter.

When Ralph Lovshin was hired in 1934, he could not attend faculty meetings because he was a Catholic.

When I came in 1973, married couples could not both be hired as faculty. That changed when single male and female faculty members got married after they had already been teaching at PEA.

When I became pregnant in 1979, there was no maternity policy.

NOW there is a 3-month maternity leave and 6 weeks for paternity leave.

Childcare? Slow to come, and started in Tan Lane House basement

photo of Tan Lane House

NOW - The Harris Family Children's Center

***photo of Harris Family Children's Center ***

The dance studio when girls first began was in an old squash court in the Thompson Gym.

photo of dance "closet"

NOW look at the amazing Goel Center for Theater and Dance

***photo of Goel Center for Theater and Dance ***

Plans for the renovation of the Cage were begun in the '80's with a 5-year master plan.

photo old Cage

We didn't quite make the five years, but 2018 brought this amazing structure!

photo of the new field house

And how about the old science building—now the Student Center?

Photo of the old science building

And NOW!

Photo of new science building

These are buildings - but what goes on in these enhanced environments speaks to the needs of each student in a changing world.

The faculty voted for same-sex, committed couples' ability to live in the dorms in 2001 and the Trustees unanimously approved the policy. The Academy moved forward despite picketing by the Westboro Baptist Church and sensational national news coverage.

A curriculum study of 2001-2002 spawned the computer science requirement, and continued conversations about time, schedule and support of younger students, and certainly uncovered the science behind the mind/body connection we in Physical Education cared about so deeply.

But again, time limits more examples.

And so... that phone call comes from Ciatta Baysah, President of the Alumni Association, telling you that you are the recipient of the Founders' Day Award

And you cry, and you tell your husband and he cries, (that's what old people do!) and 45 years after it all began you realize....

First, you work hard because you were taught that's what you do.

And you try for good grades, and it's all a bit of a slog, and you get the degree and you get the next degree and

And then you realize there are things you've come to believe in, people that matter, kids that count on you, friends that care, and you begin to focus on what you can do in the big picture, and yes, it's hard, frustrating, heart-breaking and moves at a snail's pace; it's rewarding, exhilarating and sometimes it even works!

And that call comes and someone says that what you did as an individual can make a difference. I'm so lucky, humbled and gratified that someone told me that today.

Let me be the one to point out the obvious. You are all challenged daily. How you respond will determine who might call you in one year, ten years or 50 years and say, "You did make a difference."

And now this last photo.

photo of pony and driver

In case you think a 70-year old has no life, this is a picture of me driving on the marathon course in a Combined Driving Event with a former PEA student and colleague here at Exeter.

Polly MacMullen, modern language instructor, navigated for me (one month before her death from pancreatic cancer). She made a difference in so many ways! **And may it be so for you, today, tomorrow and always!**

Thank you.