

Nancy Ophelia Ennis Follett '59 – 2015 Mary Lowther Ranney Distinguished Alumna Award Recipient

Remarks given on March 13, 2015 at the Alumnae Day luncheon

I am extremely honored and humbled today, especially in following Mary Lowther Ranney who was honored last year at Westridge's 100th anniversary celebrations.

Many thanks to Liz for all her support and enthusiasm--
To Lisa for her fantastic help throughout the past six months--
And most of all—to my classmates—for their continuing support and most especially for returning to Westridge, making in some cases a very long journey, only a year after meeting here for our 55th class reunion.

For the title of her biography of Mary Ranney, with whom I, unknowingly, had shared many educational ideals and also an astonishing number of parallels in the foundation of our two schools, Fran selected *Her Chosen Path*.

My path, on the other hand, always calls to mind Frost's *The Road not Taken*. My career has been a voyage of exploration without sextant or compass, pushed by wind, tides and, most of all, chance into unexpected and unknown channels. However, my ship was well provisioned and guided by a bright star, the gifts of four years of a Westridge education.

I arrived at Westridge in 1955, only ten years after the end of the War. My time there coincided with Gladys Peterson's last four years as Head of School. She wrote:

I think that the primary thrust of education is the inner development of each student, of her mind and her attitudes.

This belief was to become central to my approach to education. Naturally, I did not realize it at the time.

In Illinois, at an excellent junior high, I was terrified to open my mouth or raise my hand, for such actions invariably resulted in being teased by the boys in my class. Thus I was incapable of unfurling my eager sails on a quest for discovery. At that time only 'difficult girls' were sent to private schools where they wore Victorian uniforms. My father, an English professor at Northwestern, used to threaten that he would send me to an eastern (read 'English') boarding school if I did not stop talking with a pronounced Midwestern accent. To me such a fate represented a total loss of FREEDOM, an existence in a prison where every hour was regimented and controlled and where there was not even a quiet corner where one could hide and read a book. This image was later confirmed as reality when I visited English girls' boarding schools in the 1970s.

My parents gave my sister and me immense freedom from a very young age, freedom unimaginable today. Subsequently the freedom I gave my own children became legendary. Marny and I took public buses across Evanston to a summer drama class when we were respectively three and four, barefoot, clutching our penny fares, and could read all day or play in the woods till dark. Best of all, we enjoyed *Swallows and Amazons* style summers on our beloved Cape Cod, biking five miles to swim in a totally deserted lake on our own or messing around in boats in the sea. No one ever knew where we were until we returned for supper.

Suddenly and totally unexpectedly my father died and my mother returned to her California roots. My sister and I left our roots—our friends, our Evanston house and, worst of all, our Cape Cod summers. We moved to Pasadena in 1955 in an incredibly smoggy, hot July where I attempted, with no success, to learn to play tennis on boiling, black tarmac public courts. Our beloved housekeeper, Lucille, who had raised me, was supposed to follow, but soon after our arrival we received word she had died. Just before Westridge opened for the fall term my mother went off with her friends on a long planned trip to Europe, leaving us to face our first day at our new school on our own. (Fortunately I had met Carol Barnum, who walked with us to school that first day and has been a friend for sixty years.)

We were welcomed warmly by our classmates, but it took a bit longer to realize the great gifts which Westridge gave us for life. (However, I remained baffled by the frequent announcements from the back of the study hall, 6-2, 3-6, 6-4, until decades later when at last I became a keen tennis player.)

Westridge! A haven or a crucible? On my voyage as a head teacher I have always believed that the bulkhead of a school must be its teachers. All the students, including the youngest, should have the **very best teachers**, and they should be subject specialists, passionate about their subjects. At Westridge we had the best--rigorously academic, extremely inspirational and FUN, who taught us to think and to write critically.

Josephine Rhodes was our English teacher and from her we learned that intellectual ideas are universal. We read *Antigone*, as well as the *Oresteia*, which introduced us to World Literature and was my first encounter with the Classics, as I didn't learn Latin until my final year in university. Along with *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, which we read in the Ninth Grade, *Antigone* let us examine the Role of Women and for the first time we began to think of women's place throughout history and in the modern world. In England when I arrived in 1968 and for most of the ensuing twenty years, women lived much as they had in Victorian times. Of course, they had the vote and probably weren't often sold by their husbands anymore, but divorce was almost impossible. Nor were married women permitted to file their own income tax returns, obliged to hand over complete records of their financial affairs to their husbands who then filed a joint return which they were not compelled to show their wives. Most shocking, legally women were not allowed to deny their husbands his marital 'rights' in the bedroom.

Elizabeth Edmundson Herrick was in her final years before assuming the headship, and about to bring Westridge out of the cloister and into the modern world. From inception, the Dolphin School focused on areas which were also Libby's—diversity, scholarships and bursaries, charity work and the idea that the world is interrelated.

And, most important of all in my voyage, *Rosemary Lonergan*, who is with us today. She taught me Ancient History, English History and Modern European History and gave me something many Americans lack, a connection with the European world (which in the Fifties was the source of the cultural roots of most of Westridge's students). Rosemary gave all of us a sense of our place in the world, a world where history began long before Christopher Columbus or the Pilgrim Fathers.

Rosemary, who herself has led an adventurous life, paved the way for my future voyage, giving me a passion for history, archaeology, architecture and DISCOVERY in general. I have led our Dolphins and my adult classes on scores of day and residential trips to study buildings and art ranging from Greek temples, Hadrian's Wall and mediaeval

churches and castles, to Bramante and Brunelleschi churches and Renaissance paintings. I have shared with the Dolphins the joy of climbing the peaks of Scottish Munros and the French Alps.

In my personal life I have been an avid reader of the history of early mountaineering, and the lives and expeditions of explorers and mountaineers of all eras. My most intense spiritual moments have most often arisen when alone on mountaintops, or in the remotest deserts of the world. I have trekked, climbed and sailed (often with one or two of my adventurous children, sometimes at very young ages) on seven continents, irresistibly drawn by the lure of the explorers or of civilizations yet untouched by the modern world. (Amazing for a girl who always escaped gym classes whenever she could.) The spark for all this was Rosemary!

My Senior Year was one of the happiest of my life. I had good friends who are still friends, a best friend for life who flew from London to be here today but caught pneumonia on the way. I acquired the name *Ophelia*, perfect for a lifetime of acting and directing, both on and off stage. The previous year Glee Club members had been invited to sing *The Messiah*, with the Pasadena Chorus, an experience which subsequently gave rise to my lifelong passion for baroque music. I can no longer sing but when I feel stressed I often take out my Bach *Cello Suites* and (very badly) play my 'cello.

It was a year of wonderful FREEDOM. In our study periods we sat under The Tree on the lawn with our coffee thermoses and read TS Eliot and talked about philosophy. This led to another chance change of course for my vessel—a classmate suggested we take three philosophy courses at UCLA that summer after graduation. My horizons suddenly widened considerably.

I went to Northwestern in the autumn, expecting to major in English in my father's old department, and technically English was the subject I graduated in three years later. But Westridge's legendary Mme. Haas had so well prepared us that I discovered I had fulfilled the graduation requirements for a foreign language, as well as those for English. So instead I enrolled in a post graduate mediaeval French literature course and also a classical literature course in translation and subsequently studied lots more French lit as well as, in translation, the German poetry of Rilke and Russian and Italian literature.

Shortly before graduation another chance remark led to the most crucial change in my life. I mentioned to my tutor that I happened to be recently married to a student at Yale and that I planned probably to take up my place at Cornell to read Victorian literature, my father's field. "Oh, my dear," he replied. "You must go to Columbia so you can be close to your husband." I don't think this had properly occurred to me but, of course, I took his advice and accepted the place I had been offered at Columbia. Unlike Cornell, Columbia had no English department but, rather, a Comparative Literature one. Here I had fabulous professors, especially one in contemporary world drama and two in classics, and my fate was sealed. Again, Mme. Haas to the fore. I wrote my thesis on the adaptation of Euripides' plays by Racine. And classics had become my passion.

After learning Greek and finally studying Greek and Latin literature while teaching in Claremont, with two-year-old Daena happy in a Montessori school, we emigrated to England in 1968 (a significant year in world history) so I could do a PhD. Rationing had recently ended, or so they told me; it wasn't obvious, and my husband taught in a boarding school with Saturday classes and Sunday duties. We were billeted on the ground floor of a huge old house of no architectural merit, with no central heating, no fridge, no kitchen, little hot water and filthy coal fires. At least we had a bathroom. And there were no nursery schools, let alone Montessori.

Two years later we opened Dolphin School in Hurst, a very rural community in Berkshire, with a resident bobby on a bike and a telephone system manned by a local operator to connect every call, much more useful than an answerphone since you could tell her where you would be for the evening, but hopeless for privacy. Our phone number was Hurst 77.

The school began with the ideals of having the Best Teachers, subject learning for all, Socratic teaching, French by the mother-tongue method, cross-curricular, hands-on learning and getting out of the classroom. We thought we were striving to educate Leonardo's universal man! Unknowingly we also had much in common with Mary Ranney's new Westridge, for example: a tiny initial corps of students (boys as well as girls), a Montessori base, plays in French, a permanent shortage of rooms as numbers grew exponentially, charity work and world awareness.

For the Fortieth Anniversary I wrote *FREEDOM TO LEARN* with former students, and as we wrote there developed a theme—all of our contributors had loved coming to school. School was FUN. Forty years earlier one of the few differences between early Westridge and early Dolphin was that we had no Latin motto. However we did have a Latin school song—the universal student (drinking) song. *Gaudeamus* could *therefore* have been a suitable motto—'Let us have FUN!' However, FREEDOM TO LEARN has instead become 'our watchword and our call'.

Forty-five years later—it has been a voyage in uncharted waters with no idea of where it would end. Being American helped because I was ignorant of the rapids ahead and refused to accept the limited expectations bred into English women. (Interestingly, many successful women in the UK have been American, including several Westridge graduates.)

There were very few co-educational schools in the independent sector, none with female heads, so I assumed the title of Dr. N. Follett to disguise my sex. We were a template, and now a number of well-known schools have tried to adapt many of our educational innovations. In the eighties and nineties it was tremendously exciting to be a ground-breaker in the stuffy 'old boys' world. Today most senior schools (independent and state) are co-ed and are discovering a new problem--the boys are being outshone by the girls.

While all our leavers won't have the same opportunities in life, Dolphin has at least, to a great extent, broken gender-typing expectations in its students by the time they leave. A huge percentage of our girls, for instance, become scientists and engineers while a surprising number of boys have become teachers, often primary teachers, sometimes after a few 'necessary' years making money at Morgan Stanley.

The greatest gift that Westridge gave me, the belief that I could follow any career, is one I hope I have instilled (along with the necessary skills) in a generation of students. Although my voyage was determined by the winds of chance, Westridge provisioned me well for the challenges.

Thank you.