

We Know Them as People
Mary McLean Evans '82
Class and Charter Day
May 12, 2014

Thank you, Joan, for that warm welcome. It's great to be together celebrating the end of the year.

I've been to a lot of Class & Charter Day ceremonies and have heard a lot of these speeches, so when Joan asked me to speak this year, I was anxious. For example, my senior year, the speaker was the very distinguished William M. Bristol, Hamilton Class of 1917, senior executive at one of the world's largest pharmaceutical companies and long-standing college trustee and benefactor. Pretty daunting until I realized that I could remember all that about him, what a beautiful day it was, and the prizes I won, but not one word of his speech.

So, with the pressure off, I'd like to talk today about the Hamilton College of Mr. Bristol's time as well as today, with a short stop somewhere in the middle to reflect on my own undergraduate years. My remarks are called "We Know Them as People," and I freely admit that I lifted the phrase from Sidney Wertimer, our beloved professor of economics. Sidney insisted that *the thing* that sets Hamilton apart is that members of our community really care about each other as individuals: people with hopes, ambitions and dreams, not just teachers, students or classmates and that this is what makes Hamilton a very special place. My premise is that this hasn't changed much in 200 years. Relationships that begin here engender a commitment to people and a loyalty to Hamilton that motivates us to make this college better for ourselves and for those who follow.

Let me return to Mr. Bristol who was finishing his first year at Hamilton 100 years ago. In 1914, Model Ts were rolling off production lines, women were struggling for the right to vote, a world war was in the winds and in nearby Utica, FX Matt had just released a new beer that is known today as Legacy IPA.

There was no Class and Charter Day in 1914, but I'm sure they found some way to celebrate the end of classes, perhaps with the aforementioned Matts Beer. The Class of 1917 numbered around 70 white men, mostly from New York State. The faculty was much smaller of course – 21 men taught courses in 19 disciplines. Melancthon Woolsey Stryker – I just love saying that name: *Melancthon Woolsey Stryker* – was in the middle of his legendary 25-year presidency and let me just add that being president was different then: he was also college chaplain, choir director and professor and a one-man admissions and fundraising operation. The campus was centered on the quad behind this building, where Commons was the only dining hall (with no

sushi), Kirkland was the college gym and Minor was the library. This chapel was religious headquarters, event space and student center, all in one and it was someone's campus job to climb the stairs to the empty third floor and ring the chapel bell by tugging on the ropes every hour. By today's standards, it was frontier living.

Yet, when Bill Bristol spoke from this podium 65 years later (I watched a recording a couple of weeks ago) I could really relate to much of what he said. He told stories about his classmates and teachers that made very clear how much they cared about one another. Faculty members played a big role, not only conveying knowledge but also inspiring students to lead lives of meaning and purpose. I hope that sounds familiar. At Hamilton, students learned to think critically and to communicate well, skills the Class of 1917 would put to use in careers as educators, physicians, lawyers, executives and more. One even went on to play professional baseball! Most credited Hamilton with their success and remained connected to their alma mater for the rest of their lives. Bill Bristol was a college trustee for nearly 60 years and his financial generosity extends far beyond the pool which is named for him to facilities such as the Bristol Campus Center – home to the Career Center – and to scholarships, fellowships and the Great Names program. Did young Bill know any of this 100 years ago? No, but even with just one year under his belt, he knew for certain that this college was *his* college and that bond held him close for the rest of his life.

Fast forward to the late 1970s. The Viet Nam war had recently ended and the country was in the midst of a social and cultural revolution that was turning many college campuses on end. Most families had cars, but most students did not. Phone conversations meant land lines and you planned ahead for long distance calls home. Television meant just four networks and the news came from Walter Cronkite every evening on CBS at 6:30.

As Joan mentioned, my dad was a Hamilton alum and like many children of Hamilton alumni – my own two included – I grew up a little confused about why people would be so attached to someplace so far away in distance and years. But Hamilton did its magic and I loved the idea of joining the first coeducational class, especially knowing that 10 years of Kirkland women had paved the way. I was accepted early decision and in the fall of 1978 came to another frontier Hamilton. Here I and many of my classmates experienced diversity for the first time, though by today's standards this was hardly a diverse campus. The Dark Side was still new. Chemistry occupied what is now the Fitness Center. Carole Belini-Sharp was our theatre department and in 1978 she was already making it clear that Minor Theatre was outdated and in need of replacement. Since Bundy Dining Hall was open in those days, we had three places to eat -- but still no sushi; there were very few televisions on campus, with no cable, no internet, no cell phones and no jitney – we traveled up and down the Hill by sticking out our thumbs, which of course horrifies me as a parent today.

Hamilton was struggling to complete a challenging combination of two strong-willed and distinct colleges. Like any good marriage, the resulting combination was much stronger than either of the two individuals and I wouldn't trade being a part of that transition for anything. Over four years, my classmates and I came to know one another as people. Not all the same people, for sure. We had very different hopes, dreams and aspirations, and I'd like to think that it was here we learned to respect and appreciate one another as those individuals we were and are. Many of my former faculty members are still here, like my first advisor, Jon Vaughan, my first English professor John O'Neill, and my biology department professors Dave Gapp and Sue Ann Miller. We were inspired by these and other faculty members whose integrity, decency and enthusiasm made learning irresistible and whose interest in us as individuals helped shape us as human beings. I hope that sounds familiar.

While I don't think we had any professional athletes in the early '80s, my contemporaries went on to make their mark as elected officials, industry leaders, and social activists like Mary Bonauto, Class of 1983, whose determination and commitment to what is right championed the cause of same-sex marriage all the way to the Supreme Court. Most of us credit our start to the education we received and the habits we formed while we were here, and we return regularly to the Hill to reconnect. Ten of us have children at Hamilton today, and still others are the parents of recent graduates. Two of my classmates, Amy Goodfriend and Greg Hoogkamp, are college trustees and I'm joined here on the Hill by a few other "lifers." My classmate Rob Kantrowitz chairs the math department. Athletic Director Jon Hind and Opportunity Programs Director Phyllis Holmes Breland – by the way, the first woman member of Pentagon – were classmates just a couple of years ahead of us. Together I'd like to think we all have a broad impact on today's Hamilton and I know the fact that we are alumni strengthens our work.

In his new book, Professor Dan Chambliss writes about college success and explains that it's really quite simple: a lot of it comes down to forming meaningful relationships with "adults" early. My instinct is that other things come into play too, like roommates, the curriculum, facilities and, yes, even sushi. But I'm betting every one of you has at least one relationship that anchors your Hamilton experience. Think for a moment about that person – faculty, staff, community member – and if you can, recall the moment you met. I hope it was easy to think right away of someone who has had a pretty big influence on you. But maybe you also notice that you don't usually realize when you meet someone destined to play a starring role in your life. The lesson here: never treat any relationship as insignificant, especially a Hamilton one.

Over the years, I've been lucky to have lots of significant Hamilton relationships. One that has loomed large is with the Wertimers, especially Eleanor Walsh Wertimer.

Sid and Ellie Wertimer came to Hamilton in 1952 and began a Hamilton lifetime that ended when Ellie died in January just short of her 92nd birthday. Their shared influence on this college

is legendary and was recognized when we named the former DKE House in their honor. Sid was my economics professor. Despite my mediocre academic performance, he took an interest in me, as he did in so many of his students, and the next thing I knew, there I was in the Wertimer home for dinner. To Professor Chambliss's point, I remember almost nothing about economics – Supply, Demand - yet can tell you about the shepherd's pie we ate that night while a lifetime relationship with Sid and Ellie was born.

Ellie Wertimer was one of the smartest, funniest, most brutally honest women I've ever met. Graduating from Smith College in 1944 was an achievement, but graduating as one of the few women to do so from the University of Buffalo Law School a few years later was an even better reflection of her intelligence and spirit. From the day she arrived, Ellie made it a point to know more about our college, community and world than almost anyone, and she *always* had an opinion. She and Sidney were devoted to Hamilton and over the years, thousands of alumni returned regularly to the Wertimer home on College Hill Road. When you were greeted with "Welcome Home" from one or the other, you knew they meant it and that you were home. Ellie invested in people on and off the hill as a fierce champion – especially for women – until right before she died, and while she technically had no formal role at Hamilton, her influence over six decades helped shape the College we know today. She taught us by example to advocate for what is right and to support and mentor those who follow us. I miss her.

Like Bill Bristol in 1982, I'm up here telling stories about my experience and hoping you will see your story in mine. Maybe you'll see something in Bill Bristol's too, because across the decades, that's what Hamilton offers: relationships that continue to grow and to influence us long after we leave this Hill. Here you have found faculty, staff and contemporaries who really care about you as people, not just a seat in the classroom or player on a field or someone down the hall. Your RA, advisor, professor, Marge (in my day it was Fran) in Commons, staff members across campus from athletics to the library to the physical plant to the career center are all invested in your success. Here I hope you have found your voice and the freedom to express yourself as a rightful member of the Hamilton community. Whether you are a first year student or a senior, let that voice continue to develop over the course of your time here and your long life ahead. Equally important, I also hope you have learned to listen – it's time well spent and a skill we all need to practice for the rest of our lives.

Somewhere here I hope you will also recognize your own role in shaping Hamilton. Yes, Joan is our president, and Pat Reynolds and our faculty oversee our educational mission. Truthfully, though, it is our duty as individual members of this community to leave Hamilton better than we found it. That's not always easy, but it's important.

When you do leave this Hill, always make a fool of yourself when you see a Hamilton baseball cap or t-shirt on a stranger in a distant place – better yet, take a photo and get scrolled! Say yes

when you are asked to talk to someone about your job or to interview a high school senior, and yes even to that student phone-a-thon caller asking for your annual fund gift, because Hamilton needs you. I'll repeat what I said earlier: never treat a Hamilton relationship as insignificant. In exchange, you will find that this college will provide you with a warm welcome home when you return and support wherever and whenever you need it. That's because we do indeed know one another as people.

With Bill Bristol, this narrative reaches back to the Hamilton of a hundred years ago, and in 30 or 40 years, one of you will be giving this speech on a campus that will have changed in ways we can't even imagine. But I'm confident that this will still be a place where relationships create commitment to one another and loyalty to Hamilton. As for me, whatever my life holds, I'll be wearing that Hamilton hat and returning to this Hill – coming home – for as long as I can. Thank you.