

Hamilton Class & Charter Day

May 4, 2007

“Kirkland Mattered: A Brief Personal Account”

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Good afternoon Madame President, members of the faculty, students, friends.

I am honored that President Stewart has given me the opportunity to talk with you about my alma mater – Kirkland College. I graduated 30 years ago in 1977. For those of you who know your College's history, that was the spring that the merger between Hamilton and Kirkland was announced. In fact, the announcement was made 3 weeks before our graduation and for most us, was a complete surprise. Imagine if you can - hearing just before you leave the place you've loved that it is not going to exist any more... at least not in the same form. We were all devastated and, in the spirit of Kirkland, were prepared to revolt against the decision.

You see – Hamilton and Kirkland were very different – both devoted to liberal arts education, but distinctive in their pedagogical approaches. At Kirkland, we received written evaluations, not grades. At Kirkland, the classes were small and informal - most professors taught their classes in a highly interactive mode, engaging students in a dialogue; in comparison, many Hamilton professors – at that time - taught large classes in a lecture style. At Kirkland, the students participated equally in governing the College. Moreover, at Kirkland, a number of professors lived on campus and participated actively in the lives of students. Kirkland was innovative, experimenting with an approach to undergraduate education that was in distinct contrast to Hamilton.

Hamilton created Kirkland in 1965 and the first class of women enrolled in 1968. The concept, which was the result of a long-range planning effort chaired by Dick Couper, was to create the first of several colleges. Ultimately, the Hamilton trustees envisioned a group of independent but coordinated schools, similar in concept to the Claremont group in California. However, the demographics changed before that vision could be realized. As a result, Kirkland was the first and only coordinate college established and it lived a short, but vibrant life until it was merged with Hamilton in 1978.

This afternoon, I want to give you a sense of Kirkland and why it was such a special place. I'd like to share my perspective about what has changed in the intervening years and what hasn't – because there is much on this campus that reminds me of the College that I attended. There is no question that the Hamilton of today is a marvelous meld of the Kirkland and Hamilton that I knew in the mid-1970's.

Kirkland distinguished itself to me from the very beginning; I have a clear memory of receiving my offer of acceptance to the school. Think back to your acceptance at Hamilton. There is such trepidation when you are receiving the letters that indicate whether or not you have been accepted. In the early 1970's, most colleges just sent a letter – not the big package that they send now; that package of logistical details came later. As a result, you could not tell from the size of the envelope what the answer was. But, Kirkland did something different. The envelope was the same size, but written in big, bold letters that you could see through the back of the envelope, was the word – YES. When I read that word, I was simultaneously relieved and excited. Yes! I had been accepted into this very distinctive place.

So, what made Kirkland so distinctive? I would like to read some of the text from an advertisement for the new college that appeared in 1967:

Kirkland College believes that something still exists called the joy of learning. This small women's college believes that learning is a mind-expanding experience – an experience that should continue and continue, after graduation. When Kirkland College opens in September of 1968, it will be the first independent women's college in the East since 1926. ... Because it is new and independent, Kirkland will be able to put contemporary educational ideas into practice.

There are not departments at Kirkland; rather, four core divisions: Humanities, Social Science, Science, and the Arts. One course may combine History, Literature, Philosophy, and Art...just as life does....Kirkland will teach, guide and grade each student on what she can do, not on what the class is doing. (TIME magazine, December 1967)

To put this in perspective, Kirkland had no Dean's list, no graduation honors, no Phi Beta Kappa, and no Class & Charter Day prizes. At the time, the idea of Kirkland was a bold one – learning for learning's sake.

When I arrived in the fall of 1973, the first Kirkland class – the charter class – had graduated the year before. The members of the charter class were – and still are – legendary to Kirkland alumnae who graduated in the later years. Those women were pioneers - brave enough to attend a college that did not have all of the details worked out –that did not even have its buildings built. In an early admissions catalogue, there was an invitation and a warning – “If you are interested in Kirkland, you should be someone who is not afraid of a new situation which will require your participation to define itself. You will be part of a process here, part of an institution taking on shape and characteristics from the people who make it up.” The women of the Charter Class were expected to help build the College – if not physically, certainly conceptually. And, the members of that class were issued green Kirkland hard hats, not only as protection from the ongoing construction, but also as a symbol that they were helping to create a new college for women.

The distinctive, concrete architecture of the south campus – or as I call it, the Kirkland campus – was essentially a work in progress for the first 5 years of Kirkland's life. The architect, Ben Thompson, was chosen to design buildings that were as bold and cutting edge as the educational approach. Everything was carefully planned – brightly colored walls and window blinds offset the concrete; striking Marimekko fabric was used for slipcovers and drapes in the suites. Standing outside those buildings and looking in, you saw a beautiful patchwork of bright colors framed by the gray concrete. It was very colorful and very bold. You all refer to it as the “Dark Side”, but that is relatively new nomenclature. We Kirkland women puzzle over that terminology. We're not sure when, where or why it originated. One student recently told me that it was because Kirkland College had frequent lighting outages. But I can assure you; the Kirkland campus had plenty of electricity and did not suffer from darkness.

One of the brightest lights and a name that is synonymous with Kirkland is Sam Babbitt, the first and only President of Kirkland College. Sam – which is what everyone called him – was charismatic, emotionally committed to Kirkland, and young; he was only 36 years old when he became President. From the very beginning, Sam was the guiding light for the College, instrumental in the planning and establishment of the academic principles of Kirkland. Sam is still very committed to Kirkland and actively engaged with Kirkland alumnae. He recently published a book entitled Limited Engagement: An Intimate History of the Rise & Fall of a Coordinate College for Women. In it, he tells the story of Kirkland from his personal perspective. There is no other individual who played a bigger part in Kirkland's formation or its 10-year history, or whose name is more closely linked to Kirkland College.

Kirkland professors were an iconoclastic bunch. They came to a start-up college, unsure of how it would evolve, but willing to take a risk because of the opportunity to create something brand new. You actually know a number of them – George Bahlke, Carole Bellini-Sharp, Dennis Gilbert, Sue Ann Miller, Robert Muirhead, Nancy and Peter Rabinowitz, Doug Raybeck, Bill Rosenfeld, Carol Rupprecht, Bill Salzillo and Rick Werner. They were then young teachers who were intrigued by the promise of Kirkland. Doug Raybeck, who was, not surprisingly, one of my favorites, likes to tell the story of finishing graduate school and having to choose where he would teach. He was offered several positions – some at large, well-established colleges and universities. But, he was so excited by the opportunity to create the Anthropology curriculum at Kirkland that there was no question in his mind the choice he would make. His friends thought he was crazy – how could he choose the uncertainty of a brand new place that didn't even have finished buildings over the prestige of an established institution. His choice was emblematic; all of the professors who started Kirkland – who took a risk on Kirkland – were more interested in the chance to build a new pedagogy than in a more traditional academic career progression. And their enthusiasm showed in the way they taught – and, I suspect, still teach. They were engaged, excited and energizing. Their classroom styles emphasized engagement; they wanted students to think for themselves, to challenge, to learn how to make a persuasive argument.

I have mentioned that Kirkland involved students in the definition and structure of the College's governance. A key tenet of the College was that students would be actively engaged in running the institution. The Kirkland Assembly was the governing body with equal representation from the administration, the faculty and the students. One of my strong memories is of the Kirkland Assembly meetings in the Red Pit. I hope you know that the Red Pit of Kirkland had no chairs – we sat on the floor. If you take a Kirkland alumna into the Red Pit now, she'll gasp and barely recognize the place! So, imagine the Red Pit without chairs, filled to the brim with students, administrators and faculty members. With people sitting on the floor, you could fit many more people in the space and those meetings drew a real crowd. No matter what the agenda, the meetings would go on forever and involve active debate. They were raucous affairs, reflecting the variety of opinions held by members of the Kirkland community.

One of the enduring legends about Kirkland is how different the women were as compared to the Hamilton men. Like most legends, there is some truth and some fiction in this. Kirkland women tended to be more liberal politically... in a small number of cases, even radical. However, there were also many Kirkland women –like me – who took classes and spent time on both sides of the road and enjoyed what each place offered. Moreover, perhaps like the adage that opposites attract, there were many Hamilton-Kirkland couples. In one sense, the merging of Hamilton and Kirkland happened early on – in fact, there are 110 marriages of Hamilton men and Kirkland women.

During my sophomore year – I believe it was during spring semester, we had the first incidence of a streaker on the Hamilton campus. I say it was the first incident because I had never experienced someone appearing naked in public and I don't believe that it had happened before on the Hill. Every Monday morning, Hamilton held Chapel here and the Hamilton men came to hear announcements about the activities for the week. Kirkland women were welcome and there were always some of us in the audience. I don't remember exactly why I attended that morning, but I'll never forget the experience. In the midst of the meeting, a streaker with a face mask ran from the back of the Chapel up this center aisle and out that side door. You now have a Varsity Streaking Team, but I will tell you, that was an electrifying event for me in 1975. One of the reasons I tell this story is that the unknown streaker was a Kirkland woman. So, I think it's fair to suggest that Kirkland provided Hamilton its streaking tradition!

A more important Kirkland tradition is the green apple at graduation. Kirkland was built on land that had been an apple orchard. It was only natural that the seal of Kirkland became an image of an apple tree with

a leaf, a blossom and a fully matured apple pictured on the tree. According to an early College description of the seal, it “depicts an organic object appropriate for Kirkland as an organic institution, growing, changing, and developing.” Nevertheless, I have always believed that the seal symbolized how Kirkland women matured through the course of their educational experience. Every year at graduation, each woman received a green apple to represent her maturation as a person and a learning being. That green apple meant that we had made it through four years of academic and social growth; that we were ready to go into the world and make a difference. I have attended Hamilton’s last two commencement ceremonies. I cannot tell you how exciting it is for a Kirkland woman to see so many green apples on stage... so many that they must be regularly moved from the front of the stage or they will overflow onto the floor and the audience. To me, those green apples are symbolic of Kirkland – they remind me of our legacy and of the College’s commitment to its students – to enable you to grow and develop into thoughtful, ever-questioning members of our society. When you graduate, I encourage you to carry a green apple on stage to represent how you have matured and – perhaps – as a reminder of what came before you and planted the seeds of what Hamilton is today.

When I think back to my graduation, I can still recall the anger that I felt that my school was going away. During the weeks and months that followed, Kirkland people debated what we could do to save the place that we loved. There were many different actions taken. I joined forces with a Hamilton alumnus – an older gentleman who was a friend of my parents – who was also protesting the merger. He, like many Hamilton men of the time, was opposed to the College becoming co-educational. He had experienced an all-male campus and didn’t want that to change. He and I certainly made strange bedfellows – a Kirkland woman who wanted her woman’s college to retain its identity and a Hamilton man who didn’t want women enrolled in his College! We wrote joint letters expressing why this was not the best course of action for either institution. We talked with other Hamilton alumni to convince them that this was wrong. Needless to say, our actions – and those of many others - didn’t succeed in changing the course of history. In retrospect, I believe that the economic and demographic realities of the time and the disparate academic approaches between Hamilton & Kirkland made it impossible for Kirkland to continue as an independent institution. However, it is important that I add that there are many Kirkland women who disagree with me on this point, who think that Kirkland could have continued successfully. None of us will ever know what would have happened if Kirkland had remained an independent entity. Of one thing I am certain, if the two colleges had not merged, Hamilton would not be as strong an institution as it is now.

In closing, I want to reiterate how much Kirkland has and continues to matter to this place that you will call your alma mater. During the past 30 years, the combination of Kirkland and Hamilton has evolved into an institution that is still dedicated to liberal arts, but now combines the revolutionary spirit of Kirkland with the traditional history of Hamilton. I think the combination makes for an exceptional place – one with which we are all proud to be associated.