

55th Reunion Report: The Class of 1961 May 19-22, 2016

Theme/Logo

About 15 months before our reunion, I reviewed the themes used by previous 55th reunion classes on the Alumnae Association website and recommended to our class officers that we play off the 55 MPH idea. While it wasn't original, the officers agreed that "55 is NOT our [speed] limit" could lend itself to some clever signs for the parade.

I then worked with a local designer in Charlottesville, who proposed four logos for review by the officers at our meeting in June 2015. For a total of \$375, she provided the one we selected in various digital formats for print and web use. We ended up using it on our class website and Facebook page, on two class newsletters, on the cover of the directory we distributed in our reunion tote bags, and on stickers for our parade hats and reunion nametags.

Here it is:



Budget/Class Fee

At our June officers' meeting we also settled on a tentative budget, using an estimate of 70 attendees. We wanted to keep the class fee significantly lower than the \$95 we had charged at our 50th, and this seemed possible without the publication of a class book. After considerable discussion, we settled on \$55 – coincidentally a tie-in to our reunion year. Initially we had hoped this fee could cover all the reunion costs that would be billed to the class, making it a break-even event. Our treasurer, Lynda Spence, and I checked with Annie Croteau and Joy Williamson at the Alumnae Association to ask about dipping into our class treasury, if necessary. They assured us that because our treasury has a healthy balance (ca \$18,000), using some of it to cover reunion expenses would be fine.

As it turned out, we had a deficit of only \$78.40 when all expenses were accounted for; many budgeted items came in less than we had estimated. Our original budget of \$4,900 included a \$450 contingency fund, which more than covered two items added later: singing by the Smiffenpoofs at our Saturday night dinner and videotaping of our class panel.

We realized that even with the modest \$55 fee, some classmates might be deterred by the costs of travel and other fees. We announced in several newsletters and emails that anyone could request "scholarship" help by writing to Lynda Spence in complete confidence. Six classmates did so for our last reunion, but no one did this time.

Communications

The first mention of our reunion dates went out in a Fall 2014 letter from our three class fund agents, who encouraged attendance as well as Smith Fund gifts for both the current FY year and the next.

In addition to the various mailings from the Alumnae Association, we contacted our classmates directly by as many methods as possible. Our class president, Joyce Spencer, sent out attractive newsletters featuring reunion plans and reminders in Spring 2015, Winter 2015 and Spring 2016. They went primarily by email, although she mailed paper copies to the almost 100 members of our class who do not have current email addresses in the Alumnae Association's database. (Betsy Carter, the very organized and thorough chair of house reps, asked them to encourage their housemates to update their contact information as soon as possible.) Class secretary Nancy Skurnik included "save the date" and follow-up announcements in her class notes columns in the *Alumnae Quarterly*, starting with the Summer 2015 issue. Media chair/webmaestro Irene Starr reactivated our class website about a year before reunion and set up a 1961 Facebook page with a high level of privacy. About 30 classmates joined the latter, though it's not clear how often they looked at it.

At our class dinner on Friday night, Irene distributed a brief survey asking what sources people use most often to get class news. Of 50 responses, 30 said they often read the newsletter, while 18 said "sometimes"; 10 often look at the website, www.smith61.org; and only 6 often check the class Facebook

page (36 said “never” to the last). Our conclusion is that while the newsletter is evidently the most reliable, we should continue using all the methods of communication at our disposal, repeating key information even more often than seems necessary.

In February 2016, just before online registration opened, I sent the first of two emails to the class with details about our programs, again mailing paper copies to those without active email addresses. Because one of our programs was a trip to the MacLeish Field Station, I separately emailed the Green Team members from our 50th reunion and others with a particular interest in the environment, sustainable architecture and conservation.

During this 18-month period, our class fundraisers continued to communicate with classmates as well. Because the officers wanted to separate people’s decisions about attending reunion from their decisions to contribute, these were two entirely separate communications efforts. In retrospect, it would have been better to have a coordinated master plan.

Attendance

Betsy Carter began assembling her team of house reps in the early fall of 2015, contacting all classmates in some houses. In the end, she was able to get a representative from all but two houses. In nearly half the houses, though, the person who agreed to contact her housemates did not plan to attend reunion herself, but still made calls or wrote notes. Conflicts with a grandchild’s graduation, a family member’s significant birthday celebration, difficulty in traveling alone, and poor health were the main reasons given for people’s decision not to attend.

We were a little disappointed, but not surprised, that only 62 classmates and 10 spouses registered, as 1961 attendance at our 50th had been considerably below average as well. However, those who *did* come commented that the smaller number was nice because the atmosphere was mellow and it was possible to catch up with almost everyone. We saw another benefit at our class dinners: more space in the room and a very pleasant noise level.

Headquarters/Handouts/Student Ambassadors

Jill Benedict chaired our headquarters in Chase-Duckett, which was a comfortable place for informal gatherings, especially in the late afternoons and after dinner. She brought a Keurig coffee & tea maker, which was very popular; other beverages, cheese and crackers, and a few other snacks were also available on one long table throughout the day.

A second long table held the tote bags for classmates to pick up as they arrived. They were filled with six items: A list of attendees, a sheet with details about our class-specific programs (I had made copies of these before leaving home.), a stapled 8.5 x 5.5” directory of classmates’ contact information, a small bar of soap, and the parade gear. Paradise Copies in Northampton had formatted and printed the directories, using a data file supplied by the Alumnae Association. I had reviewed the file before it went and proofed the directory pages before they were printed. We ordered 125 copies, wanting to have extras to send to volunteers who weren’t able to attend.

The third table held memorabilia of our college days, some brought by classmates and others from the boxes in our locker. Also on display was a small poster listing the names of the 60 members of our class who had died since 1957. This was prepared by the Alumnae Association; Irene Starr had also sorted those names by house, by date of death

Our three student ambassadors were a great help in displaying memorabilia from the boxes in our locker, assembling the materials and parade gear in individual tote bags, and refreshing (and packing up at the end of the evening) the food on the snack table. They were efficient in calling for shuttles, updating the message board in the front hall, and in contacting the facilities staff for help in hanging our large class banner and in getting a flat-screen monitor set up to show videos of our earlier class reunions. They also knew the answer to almost any question. All in all, they were terrific!

Programs

Sherley Young and Kitty Wheeler organized a panel designed to show both that some of our classmates are still active professionally and that opportunities for women in those fields have changed significantly since our graduation. Professor Lisa Armstrong, who directs Smith's program for the study of women and gender, moderated the discussion with panelists Virginia Taylor (law), Harriett Destler (global assistance) and Sherrie Cutler (architecture/urban design). At the suggestion of a classmate who could not come to reunion, we arranged for the college's IT department to videotape this session; there's a link to it on our website: www.smith61.org or <http://alumnae.smith.edu/smithcms/1961/>.

We also planned several other activities specifically for our class:

- Ann Hooke led a before-breakfast stroll around campus on Friday, including peeks at a few places we weren't familiar with: the long-time Capen garden and the relatively new geology rock garden next to Burton.
- Nancy Skurnik played from her piano book of Broadway tunes in the Chase living room after dinner on Friday. Some people joined her around the piano to sing, while others enjoyed it as background music.
- Betsy Treynor coordinated a Sunday morning trip to Smith's MacLeish Field Station in Whately, where the director explained the award-winning sustainable classroom and pointed out some of the many student and faculty projects under way on the property. We are grateful to CEEDS for providing an 11-passenger van for this trip; other classmates followed in four cars.

Specifics about these events were listed on a class program sheet in each person's tote bag.

Parade/Costumes/Nametags

Working with our estimate of \$10 per person to spend on costume items, Nancy Bissell researched various possibilities online. We thought at first that yellow—our class color—umbrellas would look good and would protect us rain or shine, but getting decent ones wouldn't leave enough money to get tote bags or anything else. Some classmates had said they didn't want any more "stuff" at this point in life, especially anything with a printed logo. Nancy found yellow cotton bandanas and nice-looking painters' caps, to which I attached removable stickers with our class logo. The tote bags weren't high-end, but were big enough to hold everything we wanted to distribute and to carry people's personal items in the parade.

Here's how we looked:

Four signs was the recommended number for our number of marchers. Ellen Nodelman came up with catchy slogans using the speed limit theme: 61@ 55: Full Speed Ahead; We Yield to No One; No[T] Idling; and No Speed Limit for Us. Toni Russin was our parade coordinator on Saturday morning, handing out the signs and getting us assembled in the proper order.

Because the companies supplying the hats, bandanas and tote bags required a minimum order of 100, we had many left over. Rather than discard them or store them in our class locker, I found a classmate who offered to take them to a teacher friend in Schenectady who works with special needs kids. This donation seemed a worthwhile—and efficient—way to deal with the extras.



Early on, Nancy Peters had the thought that we should make our nametags distinctive in some way, so we could identify members of 1961 even from a distance. The plastic tag-holders on lanyards supplied by the Alumnae Association were useful for holding our key cards, but they all looked the same. We finally came up with the idea of having our reunion logo printed on 1"-square stickers and putting those in the lower middle of each nametag as people arrived at headquarters, being careful not to cover up the QR logo. I had these small stickers, as well as the larger ones for our caps, printed at a quick-copy place here in Charlottesville.

Class dinners

Our assigned space in the Conference Center above Paradise Pond worked out beautifully, especially as the weather allowed us to use the patio for cocktails both nights. Most people walked over, but the shuttles were convenient for others. Tina Long, who has been chairing our reunion dinners for years, selected appealing dishes from the options available.

On Friday night, President McCartney's brief remarks were the main event. After she had mentioned several memorable events during our time at Smith, members of the class spontaneously started telling her of other enduring memories (English with Sylvia Plath, Ella Fitzgerald's concert, and more). Joyce Spencer and I made announcements and thanked the many volunteers who had helped make this reunion possible. We ended about 8:15 so people could get to that night's play in the nearby college theater.

During Saturday's dinner, the featured entertainment was a 10- to 15-minute serenade by the Smiffenpoofs. We held our class meeting to elect officers for the coming five years, and Joyce recognized those who had served during her term as president. The class fund agents were thrilled to announce the results of their last-minute calling: 72% of the class contributed something to our reunion gift to the college. Not only was this an impressive percentage of participation, but it met a \$125,000 challenge put forward by six members of our class.

Afterthoughts

As I mentioned above, the communication plan that Joyce Spencer and I developed did not include mailings, emails, and other communications by the fundraising team. We thus missed opportunities to reinforce each other's messages and to coordinate the timing of contacts. The final newsletter in Spring 2016, for example, did recognize the classmates who have written thank-you notes to contributors over the past five years, but did not mention the \$125,000 challenge if our class reached 70% participation.

As for attendance, it might have inspired more people to register if I had found more ways for them to volunteer with specific projects ahead of reunion. Including house reps and the fundraising ambassadors (with some overlap there), we did have a team of more than 80 classmates involved in making reunion happen, more than ended up attending. But I must admit that I chose to handle the arrangements for several items—the logo, the directory, the stickers, the list of attendees and the class program sheet—myself, rather than delegate those tasks. It just seemed more efficient that way.

We could have done more to steer people to the class website, even though we did promote it in our newsletters and in the *Quarterly*. Irene Starr did a great job keeping it current, and most classmates are familiar with online browsing, but it was still surprising to me that many said they didn't know where to look for the list of "who's coming," for example. Perhaps a more detailed description in my pre-reunion email and/or in the newsletter would have helped. I would also encourage the fundraising team to use this website to list donors and encourage gifts from others.

Gratitude

It would have been impossible to have such a successful reunion without the steady hands of Annie Croteau, Becca Washut, Barbara Rejniak and others in the Alumnae Association. From the first training session in the fall of 2014 through the week before reunion, they clearly laid out what needed to be done when, prompted us with timely reminders, and answered every question promptly and with good cheer. We followed the timetable laid out in the Reunion Planning Guide, which seemed right on target. (Eighteen months does seem enough planning time for other than a mega-reunion like the 50th.) We can't thank you enough for all the guidance and support!

Respectfully submitted,
Louise Merrill Dudley, 1961 VP and Reunion Chair
Eldudley293@gmail.com

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