

On Our Fifth-Year Reunion

by Simson Garfinkel '83

Thomas Wolfe said you can never go home again, but that is precisely what we did on April 22 and 23 at the annual Shipley Alumni Weekend.

I remember a party a few weeks before our graduation in 1983. A representative from the Alumni Association stood up and told us who our class representatives were, saying that they would have the responsibility of planning our fifth reunion.

People gasped. Nobody could believe that we were going to be having a fifth reunion, let alone that people were already planning for it.

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Ours was a class of transition. Just a few years before I entered the school in fifth grade, Shipley was a girls' school. Just a few years after I graduated, it was completely coeducational. It's hard to imagine a more radical change that a school can undergo.

It was strange to be back to the Upper School after having been gone so long. Of course, compared to the classes which had come for their 10th, 15th, 20th and so-forth reunions, I had been out in the world for a relatively short time.

But a lot had happened to me during those five years, and a lot had happened to Shipley, too.

I left the School with no idea what to do with my life. "Don't worry," they said. "The important thing is to get a good education." Now I was returning weeks away from a master's degree in my chosen career. Time had worked its magic on me.

I drove into the back parking lot from the entrance on Montgomery Avenue: there was the space where I used to park my pickup truck. But the parking lot had changed: there were many more spaces now than there were when I was a student.

I parked the car and walked into the School House. I looked up, where the boarders' rooms once were: they were classrooms now. All the boys in the Upper School had once been called together and warned by Mr. Hoffman, "dean of boys," that if we ever went down the boarders' hallway we would be instantly expelled.

"Why?" I asked, genuinely perplexed.

"Because one step and you're right in the girls' bedrooms," he explained, his voice saying that I should have known better than to ask such a silly question.

It would take most of the theatre to put all the boys in one room today; that's another change for Shipley, a change I feel somewhat uneasy about. I think that I gained a special insight growing up a sexual minority: I wish more men could have the experience.

A stately woman was standing just inside

the door at the back of the Upper School, wearing a nametag that proudly proclaimed herself to be a member of the Class of 1943. As I came through the door, dressed in sandals, white jeans and a suede jacket, she looked a bit concerned: "Can I help you?" she asked.

"Yes, I'm Simson Garfinkel, Class of 1983. This is my fifth reunion."

"Oh, that's right. There would be men here this time, wouldn't there be?"

"Yes," I assured her. But not many, I thought. Only 11 out of my class of 59 were men; I would be surprised if all of them came.

I made my way to the table with the nametags on it: only a handful of my classmates' names were there. Many more came the following day. My classmates had jobs, I learned, and many of them couldn't afford to take off a day for the reunion.

How strange.

Standing in that room, surrounded by women, I finally felt at home again. After eight years at Shipley—and not just any Shipley, but Shipley In Transition—it is in the absence of women that I feel out of place. Unfortunately, in the high tech world I live in, I often feel out of place. On a recent tour through Bell Laboratories, I sat in on a technical presentation: there were more than 50 researchers in the audience, only three of them women.

Three students—two boys and a girl—came in to take us on tours around the School. We saw the new classrooms, the new laboratory, the new theatre (is still a new theatre?). Many saw Yarnall Gymnasium for the first time and called it the "new gym." The gym was there when I was in the eighth grade.

The lunch table conversation was charged with memories from those crazy high school days. Alumni told me of the times they ignored the rules and went to fraternity parties at Penn, or to bars in Bryn Mawr for Friday afternoon drinks with the Villanova boys.

One woman told me how she skirted mandatory church attendance each Sunday by leaving the School through the front door, re-entering through the rear and walking back up to her room to catch a few more hours sleep. At noon she would rise, redress in her Sunday Best, go down the back steps, out the back and in the front, signing in again, all in front of those watchful eyes.

The weekend was filled with meetings, teas, parties, meals and talk with old friends, friends somehow not seen for years. And everywhere I looked, things had changed:

The sign at the front of the School, which used to say "The Shipley School for Girls," (the words "and boys" had been affixed beneath with an additional plaque) has been

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replaced with a new one proclaiming: "The Shipley School: Administrative Offices and Upper School." My favorite parking spaces in front of the School are now "No Parking" areas. The front of the School has been landscaped with brick walkways. There are new plastic toilet paper dispensers in the restrooms.

And older—everybody looked a little older. Not tired, just older.

At first look, it seemed that everything had changed except the names.

But when I looked closer, I saw that indeed very little was different. The Margaret Bailey Speer Award was given to Rose Jackson Sheppard in the same theatre which I had sat in, fondling my girlfriend's arm during countless assemblies. The pay phone in the gym was the same one I had used when I was told that I was accepted to college. And Senior Study was the same one that I had used. Indeed, half the furniture in it was the same.

Every class sees itself as one in the middle of transition, but mine truly was. Five years before I graduated, the theatre was the gymnasium. The gym was unbuilt. And Senior Study was Big Study, a room with hundreds of desk chairs where students had to go when they weren't in classes.

Being the youngest alumni there that day felt strange, too. When I had left Shipley, I was older than the other students. Now I was at the other end of the yard stick.

But this time, in this greater school called life, I do not yearn for the years to pass so quickly.

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