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Nan McNally Wagner '74 - Mary Kroul McAlpin '69

Nan McNally Wagner

Mary McAlpin

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Nancy Wagner: Okay, I am Nancy Wagner, and I am class of 74. This is my 50th reunion, and I'm speaking with ...

Mary Kroul McAlpin: Mary McAlpin. I was Mary Kroul. I'm class of 69, so I'm here at my 55th and I did go to my 50th and found it wonderful and before that I think I'd only been to one reunion, I think 35th or 30th or something. And 50th was a big change.

NW: Right.

MM: Just reconnecting.

NW: I feel the same way.

MM: And I actually made very close friends with two women whom I'd known slightly during college, and they live near me in the Hudson Valley and so we, see each other regularly. So, it just opened lots of things up.

NW: That's so interesting. I feel the same way, very much the same way. That's great. So, why did you decide to come to Connecticut College originally?

MM: I wanted to go to a private women's college, and I wanted to go to a residential college. And my mother wanted me to go to Vassar, and Vassar didn't take me, but Conn took me, so I went to Conn.

NW: Oh, interesting. And what surprised you about the College during your time here?

MM: Oh, I was thinking about this on the walk over, because this is tangential to what we were talking about. I always looked at schools- we lived in the same apartment in New York City near Columbia for all of my childhood and we went away for the summer, but I was- for some reason I thought moving would be wonderful. I went to a private progressive school in Manhattan, and then in eighth grade I got restless and just on a whim, I took the Bronx Science test, and for whatever reason I got in. And I wanted to go to a public school, because public schools sounded wonderful, because kids went to football games, they played in band, there were, you know- there were dances. My previous school, New Lincoln, didn't give grades, and here you could get A B Cs, and for some reason that seemed very attractive and the other thing that kind of had me wanting to leave was that there sort of- there wasn't a dress code at school, but there were things you should wear: shoes from Indian Rock, villager skirts, that kind of thing. And my mother, who was German-born -- and we weren't rich -- so she didn't always get me what I really wanted, like, kids were wearing raccoon-collared camel hair coats from Vest's, and

she was buying me loan jackets that she could get from a wholesaler. So, anyway, I went to science. Science was sort of culture shock in a lot of ways, a lot of kids really came from DP backgrounds, and had been born right after the war in Germany. And, socially, it was totally weird. It wasn't- it wasn't a public district high school like the ones I knew in the country, but- and I didn't much like it, because they actually were not respectful of the students. They felt that we needed to show- we needed to develop into wonderful people to show the school proud, but they were not nice to us. If you- you couldn't go anywhere without a pass. They were very restrictive. So, that- so there's private education in New York City, and there's public education in New York City and I thought, you know, I would like a suburban school. I want to see what this is like, so I'll just do it and experience it and get to know people from that kind of walk of life. And I think that went in- and also it sounded very romantic, you know, a women's college.

NW: And so, were you surprised when you came here? Like surprised ...

MM: No, I didn't. No. I mean ...

NW: So where did you live when you were here?

MM: Jane Addams.

NW: Oh, all four years?

MM: Yeah.

NW: And what was your study? What did you study?

MM: I was an English major.

NW: And do you have memories of your classes and your professors specifically?

MM: Very strongly, yeah. My major advisor was Mackie Jarrell, who -- not everyone liked her, I did a lot because she was a very serious scholar, but she also projected a kind of style that was not quite serious. And I remember she would... did you have her at all? Do you remember her?

NW: No.

MM: She was from Texas -- she was the first wife of the poet Randall Jarrell -- and she still spoke with a kind of a Texas twang. She was in her fifties. And she had good legs and she wore good suits. And then she would perch herself on the desk and close her legs. And she drove a 1964 Mustang. And I thought this was wonderful because, you know, she was respected, she could- she published, but she wasn't as stuffy as some of the others. So, I liked Mrs. Jarrell a lot. She was- she was a good advisor. And Mr. Meredith. I'm trying to think. The history teachers

I found were mostly- they were very earnest and serious and could be a little ponderous. Now, tell me if you remember any of them. And then there was Mr. Ober, who was a young history teacher and all- so many girls were in love with him. And he taught in a sort of a new style and I took a class and it didn't click. I thought, yeah, come on, stop showing off.

NW: Yeah, interesting.

MM: What else? One of the reasons I came to Conn was they had Botany, they had a field botany class. We- my parents had bought a country house just when I was starting as a freshman in high school in- where we'd summered before in a valley, in the Hudson Valley, in farming country and then we moved up on a mountain. And so, ecologically, the whole thing was quite different, just learning the different trees and just different plants and stuff like that. So, I thought, oh, this is wonderful, I could study field botany. And so, I took botany as my science and that was- which still, has still stuck very much.

NW: Isn't that great? Terrific. So, what did you- how was the campus climate? What was that like when you were here?

MM: Social climate or ...

NW: Yeah, like events or controversies?

MM: Well, of course, my class was the last class of women. And Robert Kennedy was killed, Martin Luther King was killed, so there was all this ferment in the world and the Vietnam War was going on. There were people very passionately involved in that and we did these candlelight- candlelight marches. There was a lot of demonstrating, but it was kind of orderly. It was, we want to make a stand against that. I went to graduate school at the University of Wisconsin and hit the turmoil there and it was this huge school with a bunch of- I found many of the kids were sort of alienated in kind of mega ways. And then there were the riots and people talking about the, you know, the ontological necessity of trashing. And you said, come on, you're pulling cobblestones out of the street to throw into the stores of mom and pop shops. How is this helping further any kind of social revolution? And so- and, you know, there the police, the National Guard came on campus and there was tear gassing and it was really frightening. I actually dropped out for a year after that because it was just more than I could wrap my head around.

NW: But here it was much calmer.

MM: Here, we were ladies.

NW: Of course, of course, oh my gosh.

But when I started, you know, if you went off campus, you had to wear a skirt. Though it was funny because if you were wearing a skirt, you could still hitchhike downtown. That was done, so you could stand out on Williams Street in a skirt. So, yeah, things just were moving in funny ways and then we had to wear skirts to dinner. But toward the end...

NW: And you ate in your own dorms, right?

MM: Well, I mean...

NW: We did.

MM: Freeman and JA shared a dining hall and I think there was something over in Burdick Larrabee and I don't know where Bradford- we talk about this in my class with the kids who didn't- and, of course, the Complex at Harris.

NW: Wow. Okay, can you talk a little bit about your life after Conn? How did your experience or shape your life after graduation?

MM: I had had a summer job for two summers at the Columbia University Libraries, which weren't air conditioner in the systems office and when the temperature humidity index reached 93 they said you can go home early. And I wanted out of New York City. I just wanted to see the world. So, I went home and said to my parents, "Next year I'm going to go to the Upper Peninsula of Michigan for the summer. And my mother said, "Why?" And I said, "Well, I'd go to Alaska, but I don't think I have the money for that." And my mother said something like, "You can do anything you set your mind to." So, I knew I had a \$100 savings bond in the safe deposit box, which by then had grown to much more, because- and so, I thought, okay, that could be seed money and then I came back to school and a bunch of my friends were sitting around the dorm room and I sort of swaggered in and said, "Well, next summer I'm going to Alaska." And a couple of kids said, "I'll go with you." And one of my friends, she was class of 70, actually did. So, another -- we had to make some money for that -- but another girl in my class had a car on campus. And somehow through scuttlebutt, we heard that you could be a cocktail waitress in a big bar on Bank Street called Lamparelli's Seven Brothers. And- it was it was kind of a scuzzy place, enormous shed, so, this girl with the car, we'd meet down near the Lyman Allyn Museum and then she'd drive us down to Bank Street and we'd work, I think, Saturday nights, and put a little block in the door of the dorm, so we could ...

NW: You are kidding. That's hilarious.

MM: And then- it was such a strange place. The sub-base, the submariners would go out for six weeks, and then their wives would come in and pick up guys. And then when they came back, there were these just shifts in personnel, and it was really low-class kind of thing. So, I think a drink was maybe \$1.75, and they'd give \$2 and they wouldn't always tip, so we learned to say, "You want your change?"

NW: Yeah, yeah.

MM: So, we got money for that, and then we got a drive-away car, a VW, from New London to San Francisco, where a Conn College grad was living with her marine husband orex-marine husband. So, we drove across country, and it was all kind- and then there was, you know, the airlines had that student fare thing where you could go anywhere for \$50. So, we got ourselves up to Fairbanks, Alaska, and after 24 hours being stuck in Seattle, because there were people coming from Vietnam, there were GIs going up to the bases in Alaska and coming through, and we were at the bottom of the totem pole in terms of boarding the plane.

NW: That's crazy.

MM: Then on the way up- I wound up as a go-go dancer in a bar, made great money. Then at the end of the summer, went to Wisconsin for a year and got really upset, so told my parents I was going to take a year off. They were upset about that. But then I joined up with my friend over the summer, and I was renting my cousin's house in Cambridge while they were away in Europe somewhere and my friend was over with some other Conn girls over in Brighton and I worked at MIT and we both sort of hated Cambridge, so come mid-fall, we decided to go back to Alaska. So, we went back to Alaska, and again, I made a lot of money, and by then I was ready to go back to graduate school. But in Alaska, I had gotten really intrigued with the native culture and so forth, so I knew I was going to go into linguistics, and I decided I wanted to go and study Athabascan linguistics. And so that's what I did at Wisconsin and after Wisconsin I went back up to Alaska and worked on the land claims that they needed to settle before they could run the pipelines. So, collecting oral histories, on cemetery sites and historic sites, and that kind of thing. And then I taught, and then I met my husband, who also had a PhD in linguistics, and he had gone to Wisconsin as well, but he was a couple of years different. And we hadn't known each other and we just- we talked until three in the morning at this convention and so then he started showing up in Madison.

NW: That's great.

MM: So, I married him in 1977 and he was teaching at Penn and then I moved to Penn and taught at Penn for a while and then he didn't get tenure at Penn, so he went to Wharton, and I was editing at Penn Press and then we sort of went on the road and I couldn't get a decent- I couldn't get a job, because they said I was over-educated and also I had a working husband, so ...

NW: Could be a problem, yeah, yeah.

MM: It was pretty frustrating. And so, I wound up being a medical writer, which- kind of freelancing, contracting, a contractor and so we moved from Philadelphia to Rochester, New

York, and then St. Louis, Missouri, and then finally went back to my parents' country place, which had been fixed up, and my mother was -- I'm an only child -- so my mother was getting older. It's- it's lovely there, so we wound up [unclear].

NW: Great. Oh, wow. That's some story. Do you keep in touch with your classmates? You must. You do. You said you did.

MM: I do.

NW: Yeah, that's great.

MM: In fact, my husband passed away just before Christmas, and my friend who I went to Alaska with, and she's a year behind me, but her husband has Parkinson's -- they live in St. Louis -- and we talk three times a week or something, so we're very much in touch.

NW: So nice to have support like that.

MM: In addition to the kids from here and ...

NW: So, thinking about the college today, is there something from your experience that you wish students today could have?

MM: I think they have much more than we did.

NW: I do, too. Is there something happening on campus now that you wish you could have experienced?

MM: Oh, absolutely. That waterfront is amazing.

NW: It's amazing, right? Isn't it? Yes, it's so great.

MM: And the interdisciplinary majors. It was so much more rigid when we were there. Oh, it's a much more vibrant school.

NW: Yes, I agree. I agree. Well, that concludes our conversation.

MM: Well, thank you so much, Nancy.

NW: So nice talking to you.

MM: Nice talking to you.