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## VES REFLECTS ON THREE DECADES OF COEDUCATION

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**T**his fall, we welcomed home 200 Bishops to celebrate and consider the impact of a significant milestone that changed the course of our school: coeducation. Over the Founders Day and Homecoming weekend, we honored the decision-makers, the faculty, the pioneering women and their male classmates, who in 1986, transitioned VES from an all-boys boarding school to one that offered equal opportunities for young women.

VES looked back on this landmark decision in the second year of its *Dare to Imagine a Better World Dialogue* series—designed to elevate awareness and drive thought-provoking conversations about where we've been and where we are today as a school.

At a time when boarding schools were wondering about their sustainability, Headmaster Charley Zimmer and his forward-thinking Board of Trustees, led by Frank Craighill III '57, evaluated the impact of doubling their prospective market by welcoming young women into the school. From a purely pragmatic standpoint, remaining an all-boys institution meant that the school was choosing to exclude half of all potential candidates for admission. But beyond pragmatism, Headmaster Zimmer saw an opportunity for enrichment—the kind of enrichment that only comes from adding varied perspectives and voices to the conversation.

In a panel discussion with our students and faculty, moderated by pioneer and current trustee Mary



Hodges George '89, Zimmer shared, “Young women at the school meant a newly enlivened and enriched community. It is from this place that the Board voted nearly unanimously to allow girls to matriculate to VES.” With that and some significant modifications to campus prior to their arrival, in September 1986 the first 27 young women became students at VES. The boarders moved into Wyatt Dorm, earning the name “the Wyatt Women.” News crews were on hand to document their arrival and to feed the story to a curious Lynchburg community and beyond.



Alumna Lane Lenzi '89; Marion Farmer, former teacher and the winningest tennis coach in VES history; Catherine Gomez-Goodnow, Spanish teacher and dorm parent to the Wyatt Women; and Athletic Director Bob Leake, just starting his career at the time of coeducation, joined in the dynamic panel discussion about what it meant for each of them to be a part of the pioneering journey and reminisced about those

early years. The breadth of their perspectives provided a rich understanding of this time in the school's history for our present-day student body.



On day two of the celebration, Headmaster Tommy Battle '83 welcomed alumni and their families, current and former trustees, and faculty to a recognition event, showcasing the VES of today—a thriving school benefiting not only from coeducation, but also its multicultural composition, with students and faculty from 20 countries, nine states and Washington, DC.



Presenting the recently launched strategic plan, Headmaster Battle highlighted the five strategic choices VES is pursuing to propel the school forward—with one of those laser-focused on the theme of the weekend: Expand access to VES and enhance diversity, equity and inclusion within the school community.

Following a beautiful day with a Southern-fare Homecoming picnic and several athletic contests, Bishops past and present gathered for the Bishop Bash at the newly restored Virginian Hotel in downtown Lynchburg, surrounded with the sights and sounds of the time—VES yearbook pictures from 1986 to today graced the walls as a fan-favorite band, Indecision, played and guests danced the night away.



Commenting on the weekend, Sarah Elizabeth Perrow Sterne '89, who has two sons attending VES and a third joining the school next year, said: "Returning home to celebrate three decades of coeducation quickly reminded me how time and distance do not change friendships, do not weaken memories and how the Old 160 feels like a warm hug akin to walking into your grandmother's home after a long absence. I am so grateful for the returning administrators and faculty who patiently steered students through the teenage years and even more grateful for those who remain engaged with life at the school. How many years and counting, Mr. Leake? With pride, I loved seeing new and improved facilities that shape all components of student and faculty life. The weekend's farewell was less of a 'goodbye' but a 'see you soon, old friend!'"

“ Talking with the present female students is inspiring. They are intelligent, kind, engaged and know no ceiling. They are our leaders of tomorrow. I feel honored and humbled knowing we were the beginning of this incredible coeducation journey.

- Pioneer and present trustee  
Mary Hodges George '89



## THE PATH TO COEDUCATION

VES founder Robert Carter Jett had six children—two of them daughters. Even as he was formulating his plan for VES, he frequently expressed concern for the education of both young men *and* women. He advocated for the appointment of an educational committee to *actively* consider how to provide college preparatory opportunities to girls as well as boys.

Nearly 80 years passed before VES undertook a preliminary study to see if VES could realistically provide that opportunity. After evaluating many factors—market demand, tuition, required changes to campus and more—the proposal to coeducate came to a vote.

Frank Craighill III '57, VES Board Chair, at the time made this strong appeal:

**“ Why not take our rightful place as a leader in the Southeast and benefit from being the first boarding school to co-educate rather than some years down the road being a follower?**

Butch Watkins '57, the school's first Alumni Director, provided another influential voice. It is said that during the discussions about coeducation, Butch noted that “Daughters of VES alumni are blood,” encouraging others to recognize their “rightful place” at VES.

Former trustees and lifelong educators Bobby Watts '65 and Billy Peebles, at the time VES Admissions Director and faculty member and recently retired headmaster of the prestigious Lovett School in Atlanta, participated heavily in the strategic study that the board used to analyze the pros and cons of co-education. Additionally, Jamie Johnson '73 and John Bauknight '85, now VES trustees, were invited to share their thoughts at the critical board meeting in 1985.

The proposal came to a vote by the trustees on January 12, 1985. Mary Morris Booth, VES's first female trustee, recounts that “When the vote came around to Bill Formwalt—an older, highly respected alumnus from the class of 1932—of course





everyone looked at him to see what he was going to say, and he voted for it. As a tangible demonstration of his commitment, he established an athletic award to be given to a female student at graduation. For someone of Bill's era, that was huge! He turned the tide, and I admired him for doing that."

An eight-member steering committee was formed to guide the process and later, once the first group of women arrived on campus, a team of faculty and students formed the Co-education Committee to identify opportunities and tackle issues as they arose.

By all accounts, the first year was a bit rocky, but ended with newly formed respect and friendships. Brooks Morrison '89 from that pioneering class described it this way: "The monotony of blue blazers and khakis was broken by our colorful sweaters and skirts. We seemed to clash with the atmosphere around

us, but we paid no heed. We were an official part of the community and, though we were outnumbered, we resolved to be recognized as equals in all aspects of school life. We could never give up."

From an article then-faculty member Laura-Gray Street wrote of the times:

***“ Never again will we have another group as bonded by common experience, as affected by VES, as important to VES. Their impact on the school has been immeasurable. They have created history, framed and formed policies for years to come, and provided role models and high standards for the future leaders of the school, both male and female.”***

Indeed they did, and we feel their legacy still today. ♥