

SAINT MARY'S SCHOOL

Alumnae Profile

by Julie Ricciardi, CFRE

Leslie Allred Yates '96HS '98C

**Catering Director & Customer Service Specialist
K&W Cafeteria**

Kicking & Screaming

"I came into Saint Mary's kicking and screaming, and I left the same way." Leslie's opening line says it all. She was the girl who never wanted to go to boarding school, and she sure didn't want to leave when it was over. A native of Winston-Salem, Leslie spent her education in private school and credits her mom and dad for knowing she needed something more.

Leslie's journey at Saint Mary's began with a rocky start in her junior year of high school. "I came home every weekend until gradually it was hard to get me to come back. I needed the all-girls atmosphere; I needed some taming. It was the perfect environment for me," she recalls.

Leslie vividly remembers the first moment she realized Saint Mary's was incredibly different than anything she'd experienced before. "It was the focus on small classrooms, where academics were centered on what *GIRLS* needed. And, it didn't stop in the classroom."

What Leslie also remembers, and what's still relevant today, are the personal relationships she built over time with her teachers, deans, and academic leaders – something that didn't exist even in her previous private school experience.

"Immediately, Dean Hume started meeting with me. Not because I was having issues, but because he was interested in me and wanted a deeper understanding of what I – *as an individual* – needed to be successful."

As she reflects over her life and career, Leslie admits she's gone through life not realizing what the influence of her experiences at Saint Mary's would have. "But, I have these memories of Dean Jones asking me how my day was, and it impacted me and ignited an internal desire to excel."

Over time, she also realized that being a Saint meant she had opportunities to lead. From weathering Hurricane Fran alongside her classmates, to the announcement of the closing of the college in the spring of her graduating year. "Saint Mary's was a place where girls ruled the world," she says and where "WOMEN DO!"

In fact, at her graduation from Saint Mary's, Leslie was awarded the Georgia Kee Kinsey Award by Phi Theta Kappa. The award was presented to the student who made the greatest scholastic advancement during her two years of college, and Leslie's dedication to her studies paid off. She also credits Saint Mary's for helping her discover that if she had an idea, she could do it and anything else she set her mind to. She also realized that "getting involved" was important, and both notions have followed her throughout her life, including her time at North Carolina State University.

In 2000, Leslie graduated from NCSU with a bachelor's degree in Psychology. But, where would her path lead next?

Life in a Family Business

Before long, Leslie had planted herself in Raleigh. It wasn't long before she (who admittedly loved growing up in the loving home of a great monarch leader like her father) realized she could carve her own path as a leader and still love the family business from the outside. She'd always loved children and soon found herself working as a teacher's assistant at White Memorial Presbyterian Church.

"The reality was, I really loved education."

That notion led her to her first career as a teacher and she began a three-year tenure as a lead pre-school teacher at St. Michael's Parish Day School. In 2006, Leslie graduated from Meredith College with a degree in Elementary Education.

"My dad often joked that I had a degree 'from every school on Hillsborough Street'," she says and laughs. "But, I think life happens, and sometimes for teachers it forces you to re-invent yourself."



Continued...

She also says the idea of being an educator was exciting. "I was diagnosed later in life with Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) because the teachers I'd had during elementary school weren't that great. So, the idea of learning how to be a great teacher inspired me. Plus, I was determined I would NOT work for our family business, K&W Cafeteria."

Leslie stayed at St. Michael's until 2008, the year tragedy struck and found her looking for a new path. That's when her first husband, Stephen, died unexpectedly at age 33. It was during that time of grief that she realized working with her family might be something positive in a time when she needed it most. After years of fighting that notion, Leslie was welcomed into the family business.

"It was then that I began to heal and step back into life," she says. Eventually, she married again, this time to Kevin Yates, and continued to develop her career at K&W.

Today, Leslie says her opportunities to grow are endless. "I'm constantly evolving and learning how to shift my priorities," she explains. "That has been something that working in a respected family business can provide that other careers simply cannot."

She also says that when she was younger, she never imagined that "all of us would be shareholders" or working together.

"Now I recognize that the power of my Saint Mary's degree and how that experience has helped weather my life's journey and helped direct my personal involvement in my community, whether it is with the Junior League of Raleigh, Marbles Museum, or the NC State Veterinary School."

Life and Death

Married twice, widowed at 31, has been a "wild experience," Leslie says. It has also changed the way she looks at a lot of things.

"Frankly, that means a completely different outlook. That kind of experience makes you fearless, and you realize nothing can actually be worse than the moment your spouse dies suddenly and without warning."

As life has it, even that outlook changed over time. "Of course, now that I'm a mother, I do realize it can get worse," she says. "But I choose to live and look forward. You have to do that for yourself and your family."

That same tenacity, which was discovered during her time at Saint Mary's, lends itself to realizing an experience like losing a spouse means you get a reset button. "You have new opportunities. You can rule the world and survive and not settle for things. You take different risks and learn that there are happy endings."

Leslie says she would like to think that she's also helped people when their lives were falling apart in different ways. "Life changes don't always bring you to doom. Grief can be exhausting, and it's important to talk about those feelings with others in order to move through and get beyond it," she advises.

Leslie knows there is something about the Saint Mary's experience that empowers women in a way that no other place does in quite the same way. "I would hope that when people think about the foundational things in their lives they can now look back and realize that Saint Mary's played a role in that growth."

Perhaps Leslie's passion plays a deeper role because she was at Saint Mary's during a pivotal time as the college closed and became a four-year boarding/day school. As she reflects, she shares that while she will never forget learning of the news after being gathered in the Chapel and "it had a devastating effect" on her in that moment, she is also adamant it was yet another time in her life where she realized Saint Mary's women just "DO!" – as she likes to say.

Immediately, Leslie began to take matters into her own hands and took advantage of the lessons learned about leadership and perseverance. It was going through that experience that taught her to get everything out of every possible moment she could and to support her school through its transition. "You have to take advantage of moments and look at things as new opportunities and resist the temptation to be intimidated by the circumstances," she says.

Staying Connected

Today, just like then, she didn't allow the "tsunami" of the college closing to impact her negatively and instead, her passion for Saint Mary's was ignited further. "We decided to figure it out and we did. We were going to keep the traditions we had; today we still believe this was the best experience of our lives and I'm glad I remained supportive and connected," she says.

That's because she chose to serve on the re-accreditation board, which gave her an opportunity to provide input. "This was another chance to be a leader, and it was another step in my leadership development."

Continued...

Since then, Leslie has held multiple seats at the proverbial board table, and she's also quite frequently been the youngest – and sometimes *only* female – but that has never been intimidating. As she looks forward, Leslie says she'd recommend Saint Mary's today and encourage any girl to look at where they want their education to take them.

"I'm involved at Saint Mary's not because I want to relive my experience, but because I want to ensure that experience is available to today's students. I want girls to become confident and develop their leadership skills," she says. "And, I've been proud to watch this school grow over the years since we became a boarding/day school twenty years ago! The school gives girls the edge they need to succeed in college and in life. I know Saint Mary's may have changed its name, but it didn't change the experience."

Leslie demonstrates her support for her alma mater in many ways. In the past she served as a member of the Young Alumnae Advisory Board, which she helped launch, and today serves as a member of the Alumnae Council. She's also been a class hostess, is a consistent donor to Saint Mary's Annual Fund, and is a member of *The Heritage Society*, having made the ultimate expression of her faith in her alma mater by providing for Saint Mary's in her estate plan. In the future, she also hopes to one-day to add "Saint Mary's Parent" to her repertoire, should her daughter choose to attend and follow in her mama's footsteps as a Saint Mary's girl.

Saint Mary's alumnae like Leslie graduate with the skills, knowledge, and integrity they need for success. Whether furthering their education, pursuing professional careers, raising their families, or leading as volunteers, our alumnae are agents for positive change in their communities. Leslie's story demonstrates the power Saint Mary's women have to make a difference, and who are educated, intelligent, resilient, resourceful, passionate, and nurturing. And, we are grateful for the impact she's having on the world, in her own community, and in helping sustain Saint Mary's for the future.

#

© 2019