

SAINT MARY'S SCHOOL

Alumnae Profile

by Shannon Williams

Margaret Highsmith Dickson '67HS

Former State Senator and State Representative
North Carolina General Assembly, Raleigh, N.C.

Natural Born Leader

With several legacy connections spanning generations including her late mother Ann Dawson Highsmith '38C, late aunt Hannah Lyon Dawson '44C, sister Ann Highsmith '70HS, numerous cousins, and now daughter-in-law Lauren Robbins Dickson '06, some say that Margaret Highsmith Dickson '67HS was born to be a Saint Mary's girl. She was also born to be a leader.

A Transformative and Enduring Experience

Margaret Highsmith Dickson '67HS grew up in Fayetteville, N.C. After college, she became a broadcaster and later served Cumberland County for seven years in the North Carolina General Assembly. As a former State Senator representing District 19 and former State Representative for District 44, she served as chair of the House Commerce, Small Business, and Entrepreneurship Committee and University Board of Governors Nominating Committee and as the vice-chair of the Committee on Insurance. She was also a member of House Appropriations, Appropriations Subcommittee on Transportation, Education Subcommittee on Universities, and Homeland Security, Military, and Veterans Affairs.

But, before all this, she was a Saint Mary's girl.

"Saint Mary's was then, and remains now, a transformative and enduring experience for many young women, including me," Margaret says. "I did not know at the time, but high school is among the treasured few times in life when we can devote most of our time and energy both to subjects that interest us and to building friendships."

Margaret's high school class at Saint Mary's consisted of about 50 girls. As a student, she was a member of the Granddaughter's Club and Beacon. She also served on the school's Legislative Body, which consisted of faculty members and student representatives. The group was responsible for considering necessary changes to the campus constitution and Student Government regulations.

"We had one foot in the traditional role of women's camp and one foot in the soon to be explosive changes of the late 1960s and early 70s," she recalls. "We wore black chapel caps bobby-pinned into our hair to church on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, and hats and white gloves to morning prayer and vespers on Sundays. We were rarely off campus for more than a few hours at a time, which meant that we had plenty of opportunity to develop strong friendships, some of which are with me to this day. Last year I traveled to Peru and Bolivia with one Saint Mary's classmate and to England with another classmate just this spring."



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As a student, Margaret lived in Smedes Hall. "Dorm life was at the core of our lives with scheduled study hours and lights out enforced by hall counselors. We learned a great deal about each other and our families and were especially interested in classmates' brothers," she says and laughs. "We also knew our teachers well and vice versa. I can remember thinking that my English teacher, the late, great John Tate, had taught us so well that I really had no real need to go to college, but I would do so because my parents would have been upset if I did not!"

During the era when Margaret graduated from Saint Mary's, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill had begun accepting freshman women, but her father (a UNC graduate himself) was not enthusiastic about that idea.

"Instead, I attended my mother's alma mater, Sweet Briar College, for two years. Although less sheltered than Saint Mary's, its isolated location amounted to a similar experience," she recalls. "While attending Sweet Briar, I formed deep and lasting friendships and studied harder than ever before or after and transferred to the UNC-Chapel Hill for my junior and senior years."

That year, while Margaret's sister was starting her senior year at Saint Mary's, their parents Seavy and Ann, established the *Margaret and Ann Highsmith Award*. The endowment established an award, which goes to the member of the senior class who "best exemplifies the Christian ideal of helpfulness to others motivated by her genuine love for all members of the Saint Mary's School community."

In 2019, the family's endowment's 50th anniversary came to pass and remains a wonderful honor, legacy, and gift for today's Saint Mary's girls.

A Call to Service

After her graduation from Chapel Hill, Margaret worked for a radio station in Winston-Salem. "My job was 'traffic girl' and I was the person who scheduled on-air commercials."

She was then hired at WRAL-TV in Raleigh as an assistant to the man who succeeded Jesse Helms when he was elected to the U.S. Senate, and then returned to Chapel Hill to complete a Master's degree in Communications. With her new degree in hand, Margaret returned home to Fayetteville to be with her mother who was facing a terminal illness.

"After my mother's death, I joined our family broadcasting business, which later became an electronic communications business. I worked with my sister and cousins, all of whom are also Saint Mary's girls."

When the family business was eventually sold to a publicly traded company, Margaret was able to realize a long-held goal: to run for the North Carolina General Assembly. "My last elective post before that was as President of my senior class at Saint Mary's, which turned out to be terrific political training, because I defeated a three-term incumbent and was elected to the N.C. House to represent Cumberland County."

Later, Margaret was appointed to the N.C. Senate. "I am honored to have been elected and proud to have served my community and my state," she says and smiles. "It's humbling beyond measure to know that people you will never know have entrusted you with making decisions for them and their families."

Today, Margaret enjoys her life in Raleigh where she resides. "Yoga has been a passion for about 20 years, and I think it has enriched my life physically, mentally, and spiritually. While it may not be the

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right fit for everyone, I believe finding an activity that is meaningful is an important part of a happy and productive life.”

She also enjoys traveling and the experiences gained from other places and cultures. “Over the last two decades, I’ve traveled to five of our seven continents, all more than once. We all tend to think that where we are is the center of the universe, and travel not only teaches us about other places, it helps us understand the diversity and cultures of other parts of our world.”

Margaret remains generous with her time, serving as a member of the Board of Trustees for Meredith University. She is also a former member of Saint Mary’s Board of Visitors, and in 2008, she was recognized by the Cape Fear River Assembly with the J.W. Pate Award—the highest honor for environmental stewardship.

Reflections on Saint Mary’s

Margaret says Saint Mary’s today looks and feels much different than it did in her day. “Facilities have been constructed, upgraded, and remodeled. The list of classes and activities has expanded, and faculty and staff have changed many times over.”

However, at its core, she says, “Saint Mary’s remains a special place for young women to find their passions, learn about themselves and what is meaningful to them, begin charting their lives’ courses, and form the friendships that will carry them through the decades of their lives. My mother did that, my sister and I did as well, as did my daughter-in-law Lauren, many relatives, hundreds of friends, and thousands of women from all over the world. Attending Saint Mary’s is a gift that lasts a lifetime.”

Her advice for today’s Saint Mary’s students and graduates? “I have two thoughts,” she shares. “At this stage of your life, make it your highest priority to get as much education as possible and to continue educating yourself throughout your life. Education will enrich the quality of your life by helping you understand the larger world, and it will help you support yourself and your families. Understand that people can lose possessions—houses, cars, and much else for all sorts of reasons—but education, both formal and ongoing, is yours forever and can never be taken.”

“Secondly, you will likely go on to have a family of your own and friends from Saint Mary’s and other parts of your life. But no one—not your friends, your siblings, your parents, your life partner—will take every step of life’s way with you. Learn to love and trust yourself and to enjoy your own company!”

Saint Mary’s alumnae like Margaret Highsmith Dickson ’67HS 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. Margaret’s story demonstrates the power Saint Mary’s women have to serve their communities and to lead in all things they do.

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