

SAINT MARY'S SCHOOL

Alumnae Profile

by Christiane Newell

Betty Debnam Hunt '47HS '49C

*Former Educator & Creator of "The Mini Page"
Raleigh, N.C.*

A Not So Mini Legacy

Betty Debnam Hunt '47HS '49C is an educator whose work continues to teach children, teachers, and adults. She is widely known for creating *The Mini Page*, a syndicated feature for children that appeared for 37 years in eventually 500 newspapers around the United States. Her honors include the North Carolina Award, N.C. Journalism Hall of Fame, Raleigh Hall of Fame, Newspapers In Education Hall of Fame, Newspaper Association of America Lifetime Achievement Award, Association of Educational Publishers Hall of Fame, and the Distinguished Alumnae Award from UNC-Chapel Hill. Betty is also a Saint Mary's girl and was awarded the Saint Mary's Distinguished Alumnae Award in 2009.

An Easy Choice

Betty Debnam Hunt '47HS '49C was born in Norfolk, Virginia, and moved to Raleigh when she was 12. Her love and appreciation for journalism began in her childhood. Her father was a newspaper reporter in Norfolk who later went on to a daytime news program. Her grandmother, like Betty, was inducted into the N.C. Media & Journalism Hall of Fame.

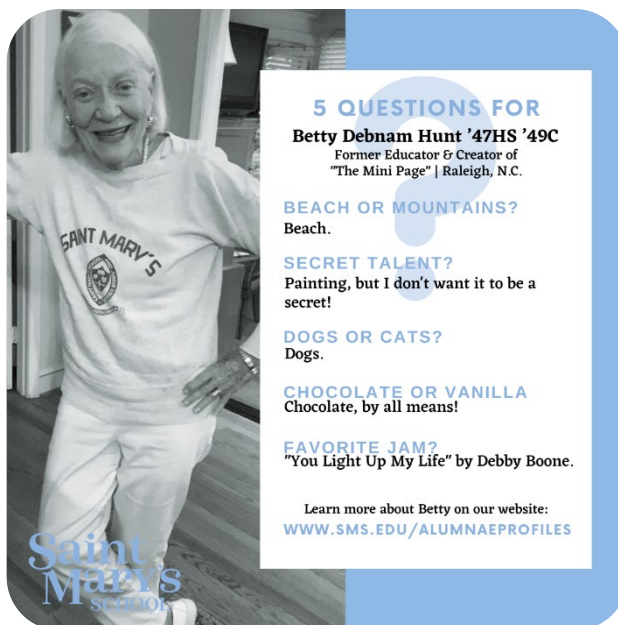
"Birdie Lee Speight Debnam took over the Snow Hill *Standard Laconic* when my grandfather passed away and ran it for many years," Betty explains. "She did everything. She got the subscriptions, ads, wrote the stories, and ran a household with five children. She was just amazing. I admired her and my father so. My mother was also a great support when I first started the feature."

Saint Mary's was an easy choice for Betty as many of her friends were Saint Mary's students. "I didn't do a lot of things that the boarders did," says Betty. "I think I missed something by not being a boarder, but the day students had an area dedicated for them in Smedes."

As a student, Betty enjoyed her classes, playing hockey, sunbathing on the roof of Smedes with her friends, and remembers her English and Spanish teachers fondly.

"I'm proud that I went to Saint Mary's because I had a wonderful experience of learning in a relaxed all-girls' atmosphere," she says. "I'm proud because I'm linked to other girls. I'm honored to be part of that."

From 1956-58, Betty worked at Saint Mary's as the Alumnae Secretary and traveled to cities around the state representing the school. "It's funny how Saint Mary's girls have this connection," Betty recalls. "It really means something to us."



In the photo above, Betty models her 1947 Saint Mary's sweatshirt that she has treasured over many years.

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The Mini Page is Born

After graduating from Saint Mary's Junior College in 1949, Betty received her undergraduate degree in Political Science in 1952 from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. "I wanted to be an abroad ambassador somewhere," Betty says. "I just thought that would be the most interesting thing, to meet such interesting people. They didn't have any vacancies at the Department of State, of course, so I started teaching school."

She received her master's degree in education from Duke University in 1963. But it was while she was teaching reading to first and second graders in Raleigh that she came up with the idea in 1969 for *The Mini Page*. The purpose of the weekly supplement was to introduce children to a variety of topics that would spark their interest, and would be useful for their teachers, as well as learners of all ages.

"I came up with something I thought the school teachers would be interested in," Betty explains. "Teachers can't teach it if they don't know the subject themselves. This gave newspapers the chance to step into the field of elementary education."

Dave Jones, the advertising manager of *News and Observer* at the time, was enthusiastic about the idea. Betty created characters and illustrated childlike advertisements that taught as well as sold.

In 1978, Betty married Col. Richard M. Hunt, who had retired from the Marines, and moved to Washington, D.C. where Richard was working as a lobbyist. At one time, before he went into the Marines in World War II, he had been a reporter for the *News and Observer*. He was from Washington and knew the town well. He was a great asset in helping Betty learn the city. He also traveled with her when she was "on assignment for *The Mini Page*" in many locations including Saudi Arabia, France, Australia, New Zealand and sites in this country.

"I love what I did because it was so much fun, particularly being in Washington, the news capital of the world," Betty says. "To be able to call up and say who I was, that we were in about 500 papers including the *Washington Post*, that got you in to see just about anybody you wanted to see. They would pay attention when you called. Nobody ever said no."

Supreme Court Chief Justice Warren Burger might be the most interesting individual Betty had the chance to interview. "Justice Powell lived right upstairs from me and he told Justice Burger about *The Mini Page*," Betty explains. "He sent me a book about the Constitution with a note saying he'd like to talk with me about doing something on the birthday of the Constitution. So, we did an 18-issue series."

The Mini Page was sold to Andrews McMeel Universal in 2007, and in 2009, Betty donated the archive to the Southern Historical Collection at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. The entire collection is now available online through UNC-Chapel Hill Libraries and continues to be a resource in classrooms throughout the United States. The archive can be found at <https://cdn.lib.unc.edu/dc/minipage/index.html> or by searching "Mini Page Archive."

Though Betty is no longer involved, *The Mini Page* continues a one-page publication in newspapers. "It's fun to find out something that people don't know," says Betty. "I miss being able to do that, just pick up the telephone. I miss that aspect of my job. I love having written, but the writing process itself and shuffling around and doing the layouts... It feels good when it's finished."

Betty never missed a deadline in the 37 years she wrote for *The Mini Page*. "I really did not have any

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time to go out to lunch or anything, I just said no," Betty explains. "I couldn't, I had deadlines to meet. So, that's one of the things that I enjoy doing now, getting together with people for lunch."

Today, Betty also enjoys painting and reading books from the bestsellers list, though she would like to read more non-fiction books about World War II.

An Enduring Legacy

Betty has dedicated her life to education and says she's not finished yet. In fact, she partnered with North Carolina State University Libraries to establish the Learning is Fun (LIF) Fund where she hopes to bring education from college professors to all learners, not just college students. LIF is "a free, accurate, and most importantly, fun" resource for learners of all ages to connect with "cool information from NC State Faculty and researchers." There's always new information, introductions to professors and what they do, and a page to explore topics related to the profiled professor.

As an alumna, Betty has remained close to her alma mater throughout her life. In addition to her role as Alumnae Secretary, she served as a Trustee from 1984-1992 and is currently on the Honorary Cabinet for the *Saint Mary's Forever* Campaign.

"I don't think alumnae realize the importance of keeping Saint Mary's going," says Betty. "The girls may be from Texas or New York City, or anywhere far away, but Saint Mary's traditions carry on and those traditions that link a girl to her school are so important. You always want to be able to say, 'I went to Saint Mary's' and have people know what Saint Mary's is."

To young alumnae and current students, Betty advises, "Work as hard as you can to do the best that you can. Today's girl is different from the one I went to school with. There are so many more opportunities."

She also says, "We didn't get the question of 'What do you want to be?' But what is the same about Saint Mary's is the pride of having gone there."

Saint Mary's alumnae like Betty Debnam Hunt '47HS '49C 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. Betty's story demonstrates the power Saint Mary's women have in their communities and in the nation to make an impact, and we are thrilled to share her story.

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