

SAINT MARY'S SCHOOL

Alumnae Profile

by Christiane Newell

Mary Virginia Swain '77C

*Director of Public Relations and Publications
Saint Mary's School | Raleigh, N.C.*

At Home at Saint Mary's

Mary Virginia Swain '77C says she ended up working at Saint Mary's by accident. This April, she'll have worked at 900 Hillsborough Street for 33 years.

When the time came for Mary Virginia to go to college, she had her heart set on the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (UNC-CH). But after being waitlisted, her father suggested applying to Saint Mary's as a backup plan. Mary Virginia's aunt, Betty Swain Crittenden '43C, and first cousin, Becky Crittenden Purnell '71C, had both loved their time as a Saint and Mary Virginia's parents thought the two-year school could serve as a good place for her to start and then transfer to UNC-CH.

"Not getting into Carolina as a freshman was meant to be, because I was meant to be at Saint Mary's," Mary Virginia says. "It was perfect for me in every way. I came here, and I loved every single day. I really didn't want to leave when it was time to graduate."

The shining highlight of her time as a student at Saint Mary's, and one of the great experiences of her life, was playing on the undefeated tennis teams under Coach Mary Lou Jones. "We played all the colleges in North Carolina, teams from Duke, Wake Forest, UNC, N.C. State, and more," Mary Virginia explains. "All those teams, and we never lost. All the girls on the team were outstanding tennis players and even better people."

Back then, the tennis team played a fall and spring season, meaning the team practiced and played together all year. "Our practices were very focused, and I can almost put a ball anywhere I want to on the court because of the focused drills Coach Jones had us do," says Mary Virginia.

The team travelled to their away games in a Saint Mary's blue Volkswagen hippie bus with the Saint Mary's crest on the side.

"We would get in that van and just laugh, or sing along to the radio, then we'd get to the match and be all business - of course we won - and then get back on the bus and go back to laughing and singing," Mary Virginia says. "Great friendships were made."

Mary Virginia and her teammates on the 1975-1976 and 1976-1977 college tennis teams were inducted into the Mary Lou Jones Saint Mary's School Athletics Hall of Fame on April 7, 2017.

Though tennis was her number one activity as a student, Mary Virginia also was the sports editor for *The Belles*, the student newspaper, served on the vestry, worked as a hall counselor, and was a member of The Circle honorary leadership society.



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"I was very involved in student life and loved every minute," Mary Virginia says. "It's kind of endless, the memories. They're very vivid to me. As for academics, a lot of the knowledge has stuck with me and my friends. We'll laugh at some of the funny things that happened in a class, but we learned a lot."

She fondly remembers her teachers and the lasting impact they've had on her life, especially her U.S. History teacher, Don Roberts; her drama teacher, Nancy Stamey; her biology teacher, Georgette Campbell; and Rebecca Gunn, her freshman English teacher. "I credit her for my grammar and writing abilities," says Mary Virginia.

"I could go on and on about my teachers," Mary Virginia says. "I think that's the hallmark of a Saint Mary's education – the teachers and the love they have for their students, even when they were tough on us. We had to raise the bar to meet their standards, and we became better students and people for it. By the time I got to Carolina, college seemed easy because Saint Mary's had been so rigorous."

After graduating from Saint Mary's College in 1977, Mary Virginia went on to UNC Chapel Hill as a junior transfer with about half of her graduating class from Saint Mary's.

"Carolina turned out to be everything I had ever dreamed of," says Mary Virginia. "I joined a sorority there, Kappa Delta, and played JV tennis."

Mary Virginia always had a love for journalism and writing, and after earning her B.A. from Carolina, she pursued that passion in a program at New York University studying journalism and publishing.

"When I finished with the program, I got a job with *Success* magazine, a business magazine, and learned the ropes of magazine journalism," Mary Virginia says.

Soon after, she moved back home to Wilmington and wrote for *Encore* magazine before becoming a reporter for the *Zebulon Record*. It was while she was working here that she received a call from her favorite coach, Mary Lou Jones, about an opening for the Director of College Relations at Saint Mary's. Mary Virginia interviewed with Development Director Henry Read for the job, and the rest is history.

"I was interested because I had loved Saint Mary's so much," explains Mary Virginia. "I never would have thought of this as a career on my own. I was on the magazine/newspaper journalist track, but the words 'Saint Mary's' got my attention."

Living and Working on Campus

Mary Virginia started her career at Saint Mary's on April 6, 1987.

"It was the perfect fit for me," Mary Virginia says. "I was applying the professional skills I had learned to a place that I loved with all my heart."

Over 33 years, her position and job titles have evolved with the times and changes in technology, but her main responsibility remains the same – communicating for her school.

"When I first started it was the days where copy and paste literally meant cutting and pasting type that came out of a machine to be typeset before it became a print publication," explains Mary Virginia. "Then we moved to desktop publishing and we were able to design and layout everything in house. After about 10 years, we moved into websites, and I was a webmaster for many years. Then we got social media and I was among the group that helped pioneer our social media pages. We keep growing and keeping up with the times."

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Mary Virginia's responsibilities include taking photographs, editing the alumnae magazine, writing press releases, creating newsletters and promoting the school on social media.

"What I love about this job is that every day when I come in, it's my job to find the good that's going on and go snap a picture of it, put it into words, and shout it out to the world," says Mary Virginia. "Sometimes I find so many good things, I can barely keep up."

During her time working at Saint Mary's, Mary Virginia has seen generations of young women cross the stage at commencement with the same poise and confidence she felt herself.

"I'm at a point now where I see the daughters of girls who were students in my early years of working here," Mary Virginia says. "If we want that chain to continue, we've got to keep it strong. It's an extraordinary education, and it's up to all of us to love it and keep it going."

Mary Virginia still enjoys playing tennis for fun, along with golf, and she returns home to Wilmington often to enjoy seaside activities.

"If I have free time, I like to go on some kind of adventure - exploring somewhere, even a day trip in the local area," Mary Virginia says.

To the Saint Mary's girls of today, Mary Virginia shares, "I think the secret to being content and at peace in general is to be able to look at the things you are grateful for every day, from the simple things to the big things. Look at what you have that's good and not what you don't have. Learn to not let the little annoyances bring you down. Shake them off and be prepared to handle the tough things that will come in this amazing, beautiful life that we live."

Saint Mary's alumnae like Mary Virginia Swain '77C 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. Mary Virginia's story demonstrates the ability Saint Mary's women have to do big things no matter what age or stage in their life, and we're glad to share her story.

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