In Memoriam: Dr. Eleanor Chaffee and Dr. Ruth Shea Quinn

Dr. Eleanor Chaffee and Dr. Ruth Shea Quinn were two of seven chemists in Wellesley’s Masters in Chemistry program who graduated with the Class of 1967. Only recently, in May 2022, has their biographical information come to light through online search. Of the remaining five, one is living: Ann Gantert Bekebrede, profiled on p.85 of Shining On. Memorial tributes of Patricia Bjorklund Phillips, Shirley Adams Harrington and Elizabeth Giles Maclean appeared in the 50th Reunion Book and its Addendum. Sandra Manning Delany of El Paso, TX, remains a mystery.

125 Years in the Chemistry Department at Wellesley College 1875 - 2000

By the late 1960’s, it became impossible for Wellesley to staff its laboratories; in 1963-64, senior majors taught laboratory sections. Motivated largely by the need to find qualified people to teach laboratories, the Wellesley College Institute in Chemistry (WCIIC) was launched in the summer of 1964. Funded by the NSF and directed by Eleanor Webster, the Institute “provided an opportunity for women who had completed work for a Bachelor’s degree five or more years earlier to return for two years for part-time study at Wellesley leading to the degree of Master of Arts in Chemistry. This program, unique for its time, included women ‘just old enough to have completed college five years before to one or two who had been away from their undergraduate studies for twenty-three to twenty-five years’. NSF funds covered not only Wellesley tuition, but also transportation and baby-sitting expenses for those students with children, a highly innovative feature.”

Sonja Hicks, a retired professor of Chemistry, comments:

The chemistry department did have a federal funded masters program. It was a terrific program for women who had degrees in chemistry but had been out of the workforce for many years, mostly raising families. Eleanor Webster wrote and administered the program. (I believe it was NSF funded). It was generally a two-year program. They took courses with regular chemistry majors and some really struggled since they had been out of academia for years. But they were a very cohesive group who called themselves ‘the retreads’. I enjoyed having them in class. They had several desks in room 11 in Pendleton West to which I would escape for cheer and advice.

Most of the graduates went on to rewarding careers as teachers. Three of them stayed on for many years as laboratory instructors in chemistry. Their professionalism resulted in the position gaining faculty status with multiyear contracts.
ELEANOR CHAFFEE

October 9, 1934 – August 13, 2019

BA Physics, Mount Holyoke 1956
MAT, Harvard University 1962
MA Chemistry, Wellesley College 1967
PhD Chemistry, Brown University 1971

Ellie was born in Cambridge, MA, the daughter of renowned Harvard physicist Emery Leon Chaffee, known for his work on thermionic vacuum (electron) tubes and inventor of the “Chaffee gap” method of producing continuous oscillations for long-distance telephone transmissions.

In 1952, Ellie graduated from Belmont High School, excelling in everything: academically, in sports, music, writing, and civics.

After earning her PhD from Brown, Dr. Chaffee completed a fellowship in chemistry at SUNY Buffalo in 1972 and then became a career researcher in inorganic chemistry for Eastman Kodak. After retirement, Ellie and her partner, Lillian Kellogg, moved from Webster, NY to a continuing care community in Rochester, NY.

RUTH SHEA QUINN

June 13, 1926 – September 29, 1996

BS Chemistry, University of Massachusetts 1948
Masters Physics and Chemistry, Smith College 1950
Masters Chemistry, Wellesley College, 1967
PhD Biological Chemistry, Harvard University, 1972

A native of Springfield, MA, Ruth Shea met her husband Hal Quinn while she was an undergraduate at UMass. (After graduating from UMass in 1943, Hal had enlisted in the US Navy and fought in the Battles of Iwo Jima and Okinawa. After the war, he returned to UMass as a teaching fellow in Zoology.) Ruth worked a research associate at Johns Hopkins’ applied physics laboratory 1950 to 1952, while Hal was a medical student. Ruth then was hired as the
first woman research associate at MIT, where she worked for two years before raising her family.

In 1963, Wellesley was looking for recruits for the NSF grant program and contacted chemistry departments at the Seven Sisters colleges. Smith College recommended her as an eligible recruit. In preparation for the program, Wellesley offered a six-week summer review course, which Ruth described as “one day of classes and eight days of homework to do”. She was quoted in the press as saying: “At first I was disturbed about leaving my children, Robert 10, Barbara 8 and Richard, 3, but then I discovered one of the other women in the class has eight children, three at preschool age; another is commuting from Nashua, NH and one has a three-week-old baby”. At the time, she was a member of the Doctors’ Wives Club at Quincy City Hospital and the women’s auxiliary of the Norfolk South District Medical Society. “My husband is a busy gynecologist. While he stays home nights reading medical journals, I stay, too, reading science. I’d like to prove that it is possible to have a happy family life and a career at the same time. I’m happy to be doing something about science – which I like.”

After earning her doctorate, Dr. Quinn was a research fellow and instructor at Harvard Medical School and a researcher with the Rheumatology Clinical Research Unit at Massachusetts General Hospital. In later years, she became an entrepreneur as the owner of several aerobic studios (Gloria Steinem Figure Salons) and real estate investments.