Order of Merit

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Senior Order 2013

Top: Senior Order 1969, from the Bonhome. To see the group today, turn to page 12.
Bottom: Dorothy Anderson Robelot ’38, a member of the first Senior Order class, met the newest inductees at the 50th reunion in 1987 (photo by David Crosby).
Opposite: Senior Order icons Virginia Thomas (left) and Marguerite Chiles. Thomas photo courtesy Furman Special Collections and Archives/Digicenter.
ORDER OF MERIT

MORE THAN 75 YEARS AFTER ITS FOUNDING, SENIOR ORDER CONTINUES TO CELEBRATE FURMAN WOMEN.

BY JIM STEWART

Virginia Thomas' appointment in 1931 as dean of Greenville Woman's College proved to be an inspired choice. She took the job during difficult times. The Depression had left GWC in a precarious financial position — to the point that, to save the school and its assets (and to help their own budgetary woes), the Furman trustees voted in 1933 to coordinate with GWC and consolidate the schools' administrations and faculty while maintaining separate campuses in downtown Greenville.

Thomas, who had joined the GWC English faculty in 1921, was known for her tact and gentility, which came in handy as the schools struggled to adapt to their new relationship. Once the merits of the merger became evident, especially in terms of finances and enrollment, its success eased the concerns of those who weren't initially sold on consolidation — including Furman president Bennette E. Geer.

While her people skills helped the schools bridge their cross-town gap, Thomas never lost sight of GWC as an entity itself. In Academy and College: The History of the Woman's College of Furman University, Judith Bainbridge, professor emerita of English, describes how Thomas "placed an indelible stamp on the manners, morale and aspirations of the women" during her tenure, especially in fostering a sense of identity and culture.

Thomas was a staunch supporter of such activities as GWC's May Day festival, complete with games and a queen. May Day eventually moved from GWC to the men's campus (and later, for a time, to the current campus). She introduced the "Hanging of the Greens," annual Christmas celebrations that featured elaborate pageants and a campus adorned with garlands of laurel, cedar and holly. She brought a "rustic mountain cabin" to GWC and turned it into a snack bar and meeting place known as "The Shack." Today it sits beside the lake as part of Furman's Greenbelt residential community — and is the only GWC building that survives.

Thomas could not have known that GWC and Furman would eventually unite on one campus outside Greenville. And she would probably have been dismayed to learn that virtually all traces of GWC — from its celebrations and publications to its alma mater, ring, and school colors of blue and gold — would ultimately fade away at the new, coeducational Furman.

All except one.
Senior Order, established by Thomas in 1937 as a select leadership organization for women, stands today, three quarters of a century later, as a time-honored link between past and present. With close to 1,000 members (dead and alive), Senior Order reveres and recognizes such qualities as humility, character, scholarship, service and responsibility. Election to the group is among the highest honors a Furman woman can receive.

Thomas envisioned Senior Order as an advocacy group for women's points of view at Furman. She chose the first members from the Class of '38, selecting women with "outstanding abilities" who "rendered meritorious service either in the college or community" (1938 Bonhomic).

The dean would not, however, have much time to help the group grow and mature. She became seriously ill in 1941 and resigned in 1943.

But it was Furman's — and Senior Order's — good fortune that her protégé, Marguerite Chiles '40, was on hand.

Thomas hired Chiles, a member of the third Senior Order class, as her secretary in 1940. After a time Chiles went to graduate school, then returned in 1945 as director of student personnel for women and advisor to Senior Order.

For the next 35 years, as she climbed the ranks to become vice president for student affairs — the first woman vice president in Furman history — Chiles planned events, coordinated campus activities, and oversaw programs designed to help students embrace the full benefits of college life.

Chiles, a student favorite, was especially admired by the women of Senior Order, with whom she shared many adventures. She modeled the group's ideals through her wisdom, compassion and love for the university, and she fostered a true sense of camaraderie among the women.

After she retired in 1980 she remained close to Furman and to Senior Order, returning often for the group's annual Homecoming brunch. In return the women of Senior Order made sure that Chiles was not forgotten by leading efforts to establish the Marguerite Chiles Scholarship, and to name a residence hall in her honor. The board of trustees did so in 1997.
TRADITIONS, OLD & NEW

Senior Order's prominence at Furman has varied through the years. At first it functioned almost like a sorority. Members met weekly, assisted with orientation and admission programs, decorated the campus for the holidays and raised money for charitable causes. More recently the group has become primarily an honorary organization, with a loosely defined structure.

At GWC Senior Order would meet in a room where the china collection of Gordon Poteat, president of Furman from 1903-18, was displayed. One piece, a bowl decorated with a dragon, spawned a Senior Order legend that, to ensure the safety of the student body, a woman must be sacrificed to the dragon each year. The members soon designated themselves as “Daughters of the Dragon” because of their sacrificial commitment to the school — which is how the group’s symbol features the Greek Delta letters “DD.”

New members are elected each spring by the graduating cohort. In the early years eight women were chosen; today the average is 15.

Members admit that the election process is not an easy task, and on occasion it results in complaints or bruised feelings. In 1964, for example, The Paladin, upset that some women had, from its perspective, been unfairly excluded, published an editorial naming additional members to a “Senior Disorder” list.

For years new members were “tapped” into the organization during a solemn, all-women convocation that was followed by a weekend retreat in the mountains. Nowadays things are less formal, and it’s not unusual for the neophytes to be welcomed to the club by being “hijacked” in the middle of the night, usually with the help of complicit roommates.

Helen Athanasiadis ’82, who traveled from Greece in the fall to attend her 30th reunion, spoke at the Homecoming brunch about her initiation experience: “I was a commuter, and when they came to my house to get me, my mother was afraid I was being kidnapped. They had to explain to her that I was really being honored.”

Ah, the brunch — probably Senior Order’s most meaningful tradition. It frequently takes on the qualities of a religious experience, as Peggy Haymes ’82 attests in the accompanying article.

Some Senior Order groups remain close and stage annual gatherings. Others come together occasionally. Last summer all but one member from the Class of ’69 met for a reunion on Hilton Head Island, S.C. “We still thought like Furman women,” said Mary Ann Klutz Hanna. “We all had done things and all of us had grown, but we still had a special connection with each other, and with Furman.”

As for the 16 members from the Class of 2013, their selection launched a new era for Senior Order: its second 75 years.

They are now part of an elite Furman organization. No matter what follows, they will always have this group, and this place, in common.

This spring they will choose the new class and, after enjoying the lighter rites of initiation, will host a banquet for their successors and their families. The new members will hear testimonials to their worthiness, receive their symbolic, black and yellow scarf, and add their signatures to the Senior Order roll of honor.

Perhaps Virginia Thomas, who died in 1962, or Marguerite Chiles, who died in 2007, envisioned this kind of enduring legacy, one that has continued under the leadership of Carol Daniels ’82 and now Casey Crisp ’09.

In any case, they would likely be pleased to know that, in a time when tradition is often dismissed and ceremony mocked, Senior Order continues to celebrate such virtues as discipline, service and character, and to serve as a standard of excellence for Furman women.

This story owes a major debt to Julianna Battenfield (Senior Order Class of ’11), who as an undergraduate did extensive research about the group. Her work is available in the university archives section of the Special Collections and Archives website at library.furman.edu.
HERE’S TO THE LADIES WHO BRUNCH

I WALK INTO THE ROOM with the usual tables and linens and a breakfast buffet down one side. Sometimes I see people I know and eagerly greet them. Most of the time, many of these women are strangers to me. Still, this is the thing more than any other that pulls my heart back to Furman at Homecoming.

I love the football. I weep like the silly alumni we used to make fun of when I see the fountains and Bell Tower and lake and Paris Mountain. I love the quirky thing that time does during reunion years when decades fall away at the drop of a hat and we are all 20 again.

But the thing that pulls me most, the thing that makes me try to make it possible to go back home to Furman for Homecoming, is the Senior Order brunch. When I was inducted in 1981 someone said to me, “This is the best honor of all to receive,” and I didn’t quite understand it then. I do now.

The women’s honorary society is the last tradition from Greenville Woman’s College that is still celebrated at Furman. It was begun in 1937 by Dean Virginia Thomas. Requirements for membership include scholarship, character, leadership and service to the university. It is a high honor for a Furman woman to receive. But it’s much more than that.

Every year Senior Order members gather on the Saturday of Homecoming for brunch, and the range of ages is quite amazing. Because of various life demands I’ve not been able to attend for the last few years. But when I was last there, we had a member from the Class of 1947. And of course, the newly inducted members of the Class of 2008.

Every year the program is quite simple. We take turns standing up and briefly telling the group what we’ve been up to since the last time we were there. Maybe it doesn’t sound like much, but let me tell you — it’s magical.

There are the stories of life transitions, like marriages and graduate schools and babies and retirements and moves joyous and moves hard. There is always someone who is making such a contribution in this world that it takes your breath away for the strength of their heart and their head and their will of spirit. I always walk away from the brunch glad. And hopeful. And grateful.

Sometimes they’re stories of accomplishment. Sometimes they’re stories of struggle. One thing is consistent: They are all the truth of the stories of our lives.

The temptation of reunions is for our lives to assume a Lake Wobegon glow: We’re all doing just great. In the Senior Order brunch we can be as honest among this group of women as we are with our old roommate, late at night when it’s just the two of us.

Sometimes life is just great. And sometimes the lump is malignant. Sometimes our days are blessed and joyous, and sometimes they are just plain challenging. Sometimes we have taken fabulous trips, and sometimes we’ve been rehabbing that broken hip. Joyous, hard or heartbreaking, it doesn’t matter. It’s life, and we live it.

There aren’t many places in our segmented culture where women of such a wide range of ages get to hang out together. Some women tell stories of being admonished because “no self-respecting Furman girl would want to learn the twist.” And some tell us of achieving things that would have been undreamed of, much less unheard of, a generation or two ago.

It’s not often you get to have breakfast with those on whose shoulders you stand. And it’s not often you get to have breakfast with those who are seeing with fresh eyes, creating and making new and astounding ways in the world.

Some of us were Furman girls and some of us were Furman women (along with those who came from the Woman’s College days). We’re a part of Furman, and Furman is a part of us.

And every year we gather for brunch with sisters we’ve just met.

— PEGGY HAYMES