

The Way We Were
(A Herstory of Trinity College of Vermont)
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1970s

“Retarded” is not a descriptor that is used in today’s more sensitive parlance. It was, however, acceptable lingo back in the 1970s. It was used with respect, although it often turned into an insult; ‘You retard!’ Language changes with the times and this word eventually lost favor to more accurate descriptions like ‘developmentally delayed’ and ‘intellectually challenged.’ Sister Janice Ryan was a prime mover for appropriate education for youngsters who were intellectually challenged but she and those who partnered with her in those days used ‘retarded’ as the adjective. It blanketed children with dyslexia, undiagnosed hearing loss, cerebral palsy, autism, as well as children with true brain deficiencies. We repeat Maya Angelou: “When you know better, you do better.” All was not lost, however, as the records show programs for “exceptional” students. These were SPEC (Swimming Program for Exceptional Children) as well as RPEC (Religion Program for Exceptional Children).



Early in the 1970s decade, Sister Agnes McCann (aka Sister Mary Cephas) who had been teaching philosophy since 1925, championed the idea that students needed to get out of the classroom for further education. She received the ‘buy-in’ from faculty and staff to halt classroom work and encourage the student to get out into the political world. Her logic was that the students needed to be participants. It was clear to her that the voting age was about to be lowered from 21 years old to 18. (This action was the result of 18-year-olds being drafted into the military without a voice in how the country was run.). Her contention was that while the classroom was the primary place for learning, the world experiences also held value. She was right on the money regarding the voting age. The 26th U.S. Constitutional Amendment made it legal that citizens could cast their votes at age 18. This meant that virtually all Trinity students were now legal voters. The week just before elections in early November was set aside. Classroom work was managed in such a way that no lessons were lost. We can find no feedback regarding how this plan worked out.

Sister Agnes was easily in her seventies when she pushed for this plan, and she was always the one saying, "The classroom comes first!" To have her be the one who took the 90-degree turn to advocate for this week of firsthand experience gives her real credit for being willing to consider other options. Sister had a nickname, not particularly flattering, of "the Little King." The Little King was a cartoon character who was quite rotund and wore floor-length garments. When the Little King moved, there was no sign of feet doing the walking: it was as if he floated along magically. When Sister Agnes/Cephas came floating down the walkway from the Villa to the McAuley Building she was reminiscent of the Little King.

At the Trinity Honors Convocation in 1972, Richard O. Hathaway, Dean of Adult Education at Goddard College in Plainfield, Vt was the keynote speaker. Goddard at that time was enjoying its heyday with nearly 1900 students. Mr. Hathaway's speech was titled "Surviving Until 2001?" As it happened, Trinity closed in 2000 and Godard followed suit in 2024. Ironic.

On a lighter topic, the Maypole Dance event was still happening. Our Miss Hunt felt the need to take one participant aside and discreetly explain that she really should not be a dancer. Since she was a married woman and presumably not still a virgin, it would not be appropriate for her to participate with the other (virginal) dancers.



Trinity established the two-year associate degree during the 1970s. It was popular both as a stand-alone degree and as the springboard to a 2 plus 2 efforts towards a bachelor's degree. Trinity offered both Associates in Art and Associates in Science. The AA and AS continued right on until the closing of the school.



With the advent of Title 9 in 1972, women's sports in schools finally received federal funding. Title 9 prohibited sex-based discrimination for sports activities in any school that accepted federal dollars. Trinity was lacking in sports teams of any real note. The Trinity emphasis was on classroom education coupled with social justice efforts. Women who were serious athletes in high school did not find that Trinity met their needs now that there was real money for women's sports. No one can say for certain but this "shortcoming" at Trinity may have meant that those women looking for sports in college simply gave a pass to the possibility of attending Trinity.

Faculty student dialogue day started in 1973. It addressed student concerns for more of a voice in their life as college students. Changes to the academic offerings were introduced as well as proposals for "Open House" rules. Sister Elizabeth, in a letter to graduating seniors, noted that "colleges for women allow them unrivaled opportunities to develop their intellects and qualities of leadership." It was this belief that strengthened the decision to stay "Trinity" during serious merger talks with St. Mike's. Sister Elizabeth was not a fan of the relaxed rules and dress code she was now allowing at Trinity. She wrote an opinion piece about "appropriate dress code" where she facetiously questioned if blue jeans were now the new standard uniform for Trinity women. Looking simply at the photos in the 1970s yearbooks one can note the more casual senior photos. Earlier graduates had published formal yearbook photos; the seventies classes move to outdoor relaxed scenes, some even with boyfriends or husbands. Horror! It was a sign of the times.

The continued advocacy for formal higher-level education of women was present when Sister (Edmond) Rose Rowan presented to the Trustees a plan for the PACE program to ensure an easy transition or entrance towards a college degree where adults (particularly women) would feel comfortable. The program was a resounding success. Sister Rose understood that not all households were created equally and that some women who would have wished to be traditional students simply could not afford the experience at the traditional time. She argued that there was every reason to offer a college education to a woman (or man) that would accommodate their home and work schedules. PACE was a resounding success. During the later '70s PACE graduates numbered in the 20s.

A few blasts from the past: The \$2500 flush was the general nickname for the art installation of the three benches on the hillside; Fruity Mary was the name for the lovely Della Robia style wall hanging of the Virgin Mary surrounded by fruit. Note that Fruity Mary was known to vanish from the wall only to be found, one time, in the locked closet on Hunt 2. For those of you clueless, this is a reasonable facsimile to our Fruity Mary.



The '70s also saw the first time that the President of Trinity was not a Sister of Mercy. Sister Catherine McNamee, a Sister of St. Joseph was president for one year, 1977. If your diploma is signed by her then you have a collector's item.

Speaking of Hunt Hall, (Fruity Mary's alleged hideout) the years of the 1970s were a big building period for Trinity. Enrollment was climbing and those new traditional students had to go somewhere! Five small 2 level dorms were built "out back." They were Richardson, McCann, Hunt, Ready and Sichel Halls. These dorms offered suite accommodations with four to six women in two or three bedroom suites. Each dorm included a kitchen and meeting room on the ground floor, second floor lounge with a kitchenette, and third floor lounge served as a study lounge. This upscale housing set-up was aimed at making Trinity attractive to the more discerning students.

The Administration Building was renamed Mann Hall in honor of Mother Emmanuel McCann. Mother Emmanuel, by the way, selected the artist who created the stained-glass wall in the chapel. That piece of stained glass is currently at St. Mike's. We do not know its eventual 'forever home.'

Trinity was often a 'sister act.' Connie Curtis and her sister, Catherine, are pictured here.



As well as the two Mercure sisters left and right below.



We will attempt to list all the siblings who attended Trinity when we do the Epilogue at the end of our Series. We have already identified more than 20 sets (some twins).

On to Episode 8, the decade of the 1980s. So, what do the Black Cat Café, The Sheik, and the Last Chance Saloon have in common? All will be revealed in Episode 8. See you then.