

Women join the CD, 1970-1972

By Holly Smith, CLAS 1972

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I arrived at UVA as a third-year student in 1970 in the first class of women admitted to the College of Arts & Sciences. I had worked on my high school newspaper, and while at Sweet Briar College, where I spent my freshman and sophomore years, I had done a few stories on the anti-Vietnam War protests.

The College of Arts & Sciences had been all male until that September, and the men were having to figure out how to cope with having female students around.

The CD's offices were in the "penthouse" of Newcomb Hall, and I ventured in one day to see if I might be able to write for the paper. That would be sort of OK, I was told. (This was a much better reception than the one given to a fellow woman student who was brusquely informed, "We don't need any more reporters" when she came into the office. "I don't want to write," she meekly replied, "I came to see if I could be a CD photographer.")

What kept me coming back to the newspaper office was the wit that bounced off the walls and filled every corner of the space. The men who worked there were sharp and funny, and I loved being in their company. The characters who stand out most in my mind were Editor Tom Adams, News Editor Peter Shea, Managing Editor Fred Heblich and Features Editor Rob Buford.

Fred was an education all on his own. I guess you could say he taught me irreverence. I arrived at UVA as gullible girl who believe that the people in power generally knew what they were doing. Fred quickly set me straight. My memory is of him laughing about how ridiculous something was and flinging his arm over his head for emphasis. Lots of times the newsroom staff couldn't do any work because they were laughing so hard over Fred's pronouncements.

Something else I learned at the CD was how to swear. Every other word was a profanity in the newsroom, and soon I was practicing my new vocabulary too.

The overall CD experience could best be described as a teach-yourself-journalism class, and we learned by trial and error. I remember covering a political meeting – a faction of the student union, as I recall. The people at the meeting were deriding the opposing faction. I duly noted what was said, then when I went back to the office to write the story I realized I hadn't made note of who was speaking when I wrote down

their quotes. Even worse, a few days later, when the story developed further, I realized that I'd only heard one side of the arguments, and hadn't bothered to ask the opposition for their view or comments. Luckily no one seemed to notice my failings; I just quietly absorbed the lessons.

During my days at the CD, 1970-72, we were living through times of huge upheaval, especially with the Draft hanging over the heads of many male students. Guys were lining up at UVA's mental health department to see if they could get themselves declared crazy so they wouldn't have to go to Vietnam. Some of that desperation spilled over into the CD, but I won't go into detail here. I'll tell you when you're old enough.

Since the arrival of women at the College of Arts & Sciences had an impact in lots of spheres I tackled that subject, writing about things like whether women would be allowed to live on the Lawn in 1971, and women's sports facilities. The sports story I wrote caught the eye of the local radio station, and one of their newscasters phoned me to ask what else I could say about the subject – he just had a couple of minutes before air time. The deadline pressure he presented me with, plus the fact that I'd put all the information I had into the article, and had nothing further to add, left me terrified and speechless. All the poor fellow got to record was me hyperventilating.

In my fourth year we were given the opportunity to have one class for which we could create our own curriculum. I think it was called independent study. I told my professor/advisor that I would like to study journalism and basic photography. He said I couldn't, because journalism was a trade, not a profession. So I was forced to give up this plan (which actually would have been very useful) and I just kept on writing for the CD.

I didn't contribute a lot of articles – I was stretched enough keeping up with my studies, leading an active sports life (I loved exercising the polo ponies) and going to lots of parties. By contrast, the editor of the paper traditionally made a big sacrifice to do his job – the expectation was that he would fail his fourth year and have to stay on for a fifth year to graduate. As I recall, Tom lived up to that expectation.

Right after I graduated I did part-time jobs around Charlottesville, and one brought me back to the CD. I was hired to type the reporters' copy into a machine that was sort of an early version of a word processor (see Bob Cullen's memoir for a good description of it). It printed the copy in columns on glossy paper. This paper was then put through a device that put warm adhesive on the back. Next the column of type was pasted down onto a cardboard layout board. You could correct typing errors if you caught them within the line you were typing. If you didn't catch the error at that point, you had to fix it later by manually cutting out the correct letters or words (cannibalising discarded text) and pasting them over the typos. Fiddly business, and the pasted letters frequently fell off or migrated a few inches when the layout board was jostled on its way to the printer. Sometimes you accidentally brought the correct word home, stuck to your elbow. (You youngsters probably don't appreciate how easy newspaper production is now, by comparison...)

The typing job didn't last for long because I was offered a reporter's position in the Charlottesville Bureau of the Richmond Times Dispatch, courtesy of Bill Fishback, who headed the University's Information Office. He had seen my CD stories and some freelance work I was doing locally, and recommended me for the job. I've been a journalist ever since.