

## REUNIONS: A SIDELINE VIEW | By Alexis Greene



Spouses and significant others are often odd-people-out at class reunions. After all, these get-togethers are not about us. We participate, but usually from the sidelines: shaking hands, smiling, shaking hands some more. We are affectionate, sometimes amused, listeners and observers.

Thus it was that on a breezy, sunny spring weekend, May 5–7, 2006, I attended the 45th reunion of the class of 1961 with my husband, Gordon Hough, or “Gordie,” as his classmates call him. (Oh, yes, that is another thing spouses et al. often do at reunions: we learn things, like nicknames, that we never knew before).

But listening and observing have their rewards. From the weekend’s beginning, at the reception and dinner Friday night at Wetherell, this 45th gathering had a different feel from other Exeter reunions I had attended with my husband. Previous gatherings, perhaps understandably, had had an edge about them, an undercurrent of competition. The unspoken queries at these earlier events had been “What have you accomplished since graduation?” and “Have you fulfilled the promise that an Exeter education expects of its graduates?” Touchy questions, these, and not ones that necessarily lead to relaxing convocations.

The 45th reunion was different. At Wetherell that Friday evening, and during the following two days, there was a mellowness, a special camaraderie, to the men’s communication with each other. Talking about the Exeter they knew and shared was not a sentimental stroll through the past, but a way of showing their appreciation of each other. They had known each other at their youngest and, some might say, their best—had shared a difficult but worthwhile experience. In reuniting they were re-experiencing that energy and youthfulness, and recognizing that the men they were in 1961 still exist in the men they are today.

As always at Exeter reunions, Saturday morning was devoted to a panel during which current Exeter students and teachers talked about the school. And as always, that symposium—“Visions of Exeter: Past, Present and Future”—brought forth conversation among the alumni about how much Exeter has changed, usually for the better. The Love Gymnasium: better. The Elizabeth and Stanford N. Phelps Science Center: better. The presence of female students—*definitely* better.

But even without that symposium, there is something about the atmosphere at Exeter that encourages discussion; there is an ambience that calls forth talk whether there is a Harkness table in the vicinity or not. In addition, the school manages to make alumni feel as though their opinions and ideas are vital to Exeter’s progress, even if those opinions and ideas are only for private, alums-only consumption.

Late Saturday night, a group of us gathered in a very uncomfortable corner of the Hampton Inn. Instead of a Harkness table there was—well, no table really. Just a few rectangular, upholstered chairs and the floor. And several bottles of good wine. But the Harkness spirit abides long after one has exited the classroom, and so members of the class of ’61 laughed, joked and discussed. Discussed what they were like in their early 20s; their first jobs; the scary, daring 1960s; the Academy; the world. Again, not sentimentally. They were just a mix of highly intelligent men enjoying each other’s company and making thoughtful comments about their own past, present and future.

Not all the spouses et al. that weekend enjoyed convening with and observing the class of ’61 as much as I did. And several of us wished that we—the female accompaniment—had found more time to converse among ourselves, since most of us have careers and interests apart from our husbands and significant others. Among the women attending that weekend were executives, educators, social workers, homemakers, authors. Often, just as we got past the “It’s-a-pleasure-to-meet-you” stage, and started to talk about our own lives and responses to Exeter, the breakfast or lunch was over and it was time to head for the next event. Message to the Academy: perhaps at a future reunion there could be a session with spouses in mind, so that we could exchange our own reactions to the Exeter experience and share what it has meant for us indirectly.

In the meantime, during one glorious May weekend, I tasted how lasting, rich and complicated that experience can be. ●

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