

## TABLE TALK WITH PRINCIPAL EMERITA KENDRA

STEARNS O'DONNELL '31, '47, '63, '91, '97 (HON.); P'00 | by Bill Ewing

The Kendra Stearns O'Donnell Window in Phillips Church bursts forth with color and energy, its abstract design resplendent with a wave of fiery reds and yellows over a field of somber blues and greens. "It's a bold design. Gutsy. That's what I like about it," says Principal Emerita O'Donnell of the stained glass window that was dedicated in her honor during a ceremony this past May (see opposite page). "The movement and colors are just beautiful. It's really the crowning achievement of the church renovation project."

As Exeter's 12<sup>th</sup> principal, O'Donnell, who retired in 1997, says Phillips Church played an important role in both her personal and professional life during her 10 years at the Academy. "The church is very precious to me," she says. "In addition to being very much a part of my family life, it also marked milestones throughout the school year: weekly milestones like the Thursday meditations and Tuesday evening concerts, as well as annual ones like the baccalaureate service for seniors."

Phillips Church is also the place the community repairs to in times of crisis, says O'Donnell. During the first Gulf War, she says, an impromptu gathering took place there "in recognition of our need to be together during a time of crisis." There were, O'Donnell recalls, "prayers, readings and music, and just when the service seemed to be over and the church was absolutely silent, a beautiful soprano began singing 'Dona Nobis Pacem' from the back of the church. Then other students joined in, singing harmony. It was as though the whole church was meditating together. It was a moment of grace."

A graduate of the Emma Willard School in Troy, NY, O'Donnell went on to earn a B.A. from Barnard and both an M.A. and Ph.D. from Columbia, where her field of study was Renaissance English literature. She began her career teaching English at Princeton and then worked for a series of philanthropic foundations, including the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, where she served as special assistant to the president.

She became Exeter's principal in 1987 at age 43—the first woman to hold the position. "It didn't feel like an uphill battle because I was a woman," says O'Donnell. "I had such good support from all quarters. There were many people who wanted to see me succeed."

O'Donnell took the helm during a time of great transition. For the first time in the school's history, a concerted

effort was being made by the faculty and administration to understand how to achieve the same level of excellence outside the classroom as found inside around the Harkness table.

"When I first started, there was a common notion abroad in the community that a certain amount of gratuitous suffering was a necessary part of an Exeter education," says O'Donnell. "But life is already full of suffering, and adolescence is already a difficult state of being. As those entrusted with the care of the young, we were not called upon to exacerbate these conditions."

Another big part of her job, says O'Donnell, was moving the administration away from a "nontransparent, idiosyncratic" decision-making system toward one that was policy driven. Working closely with the faculty, O'Donnell developed policies regarding such things as compensation and housing, creating a system that aimed to be equitable to all.

The technology boom also played a significant role during O'Donnell's tenure, as computers were integrated into campus life, first for communication purposes and then as teaching tools. "Our evolution did not happen because I was some great techie," she explains. "That's just where leadership was called for while I was there. Basically, I would have done anything at Exeter that needed to be done. You apply your leadership where it's needed."

Since leaving the Academy, O'Donnell has divided her time between serving on the boards of several nonprofit organizations—currently the Hotchkiss School, her father's alma mater; the Currier Museum of Art in Manchester, NH; and the Children's Alliance, based in Concord, NH—and a long-time interest in oil painting. O'Donnell now paints almost every day and is currently preparing for her first one-person exhibition at McGowan Fine Arts in Concord, NH, next May. She and her husband, Patrick O'Donnell '46, '62 (Hon.); P'00, have also spent several years restoring an old farm in Concord and manage forest lands in northern New Hampshire.

Kendra Stearns O'Donnell the painter is in a good position to appreciate the artistry of the new O'Donnell Window. Kendra Stearns O'Donnell the emerita principal is in an even better position to appreciate all the window symbolizes. After all, it was she who coined the memorable phrase "the beast in the bricks" to describe the sometimes grim formality that once characterized the Academy. "The window certainly shows the vibrancy, excitement and energy that has always been available to Exeter," she says. "It's a life force that is absolutely antithetical to that beast."

