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### **A LATE-IN-LIFE FRIENDSHIP**

By Karen Gross<sup>1</sup>

College presidents receive many gifts – both for their institution and for themselves and their families. Our institution has been the beneficiary of many monetary gifts and to be sure, they are critical to our growth and perhaps even long-term survival. I am grateful for them. Personal gifts range from food to flowers, and my favorite gift was homemade ravioli from a staff member – which made for a perfect quiet family dinner one evening when I had not had time to go food shopping.

Since I became a college president, many people have asked me whether fundraising is all I do and whether I like it. My answers are clear: I do like fundraising. Indeed, I like it a lot, and while it takes a good deal of my time (it is certainly not all I do), fundraising allows me to tell our institution’s story and to reflect on our future. That’s not a bad way to spend time.

But, there is one aspect of fundraising I did not anticipate: friendship. It was something for which I was not fully prepared but for which I am deeply grateful.

Let me explain.

I expected that I would get to meet many new people as a college president. I knew from other college president friends that many of the people who one comes to know when one is a president will not be one’s close friends when one leaves the institution. I appreciate and understand that. These are “institutional” friendships. They are important but they are not lasting friendships.

What I did not anticipate was a true late-in-life friendship with a college donor who recently passed away at age 90. I called her Mrs. H – although most people referred to her by her first name. She helped me lead. She also helped me understand and appreciate life.

We met almost two years ago. A mutual college friend introduced us. We connected immediately. We were both Smith alums. We both appreciated single-sex education, starting in high school. She had attended the Emma Willard School; I had attended the Buckingham School (now BB&N). We had both read and thought highly of Carol Gilligan’s work. Indeed, Mrs. H. helped fund Gilligan’s study of girls at Emma Willard, a study that was groundbreaking in its era. Indeed, it was a study that informed my own

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<sup>1</sup> Karen Gross is the President of Southern Vermont College.

academic work decades ago. We were both ardent Red Sox fans. We were both avid readers. We both enjoyed culture. We were both passionate about education.

Our get-togethers were hardly routine. Sometimes we met alone; sometimes we were with one or more of her friends. Sometimes, we were with her family. I went to her home. She came to our home. She visited our campus. We went to see the Paul Taylor Dance Company in New York City. We watched baseball games together. I gave her a Red Sox pendant that she wore throughout the 2007 World Series. (It must have worked.) She gave me a replica of Fenway Park that sits proudly on my desk.

Each time we got together, I learned something. I learned a lot.

Mrs. H had a home in Florida, and I remember remarking in October last year in Vermont that I would miss seeing her over the winter. Quickly she retorted, “The president of X (a neighboring college) visits us every winter in Florida for a blueberry pancake breakfast.” I realized the missed opportunity immediately. “Then, I’ll come to Florida this winter and join you for dinner.” “I’ll look forward to that,” she replied, “and I’ll teach you how to fundraise.” I visited Florida, and she taught me about fundraising.

I often gave her a book to read when I visited, and she would read the book before the next time we met. She read fast. Her insights were sharp. She kept me on my intellectual toes. She became my book club – and she was a harsh critic. The last book we read together was *Raising Odysseus* by Roger Martin. “What exactly did you see in that book that matters?” she asked. One better have read carefully to answer that.

When we had a groundbreaking ceremony for our new residential hall (named in her honor), the weather was terrible and so we moved the ceremony inside. We created a basket filled with dirt from the actual site – which was symbolic of the groundbreaking; we were quite pleased with this little creative last-minute touch.

But, Mrs. H. remarked that no one had put a shovel or trowel into the dirt and hence the ceremony was not complete. So, at lunch, we brought the dirt into the dining area. We found a small gardening shovel, and Mrs. H. came forward, put the shovel in the basket and declared the building project officially commenced. Groundbreaking had to have meaning.

Months later, as her health was waning, I’d come to her home in the early evening and often bring dinner (including food from our college dining hall). What she liked best, in addition to watching the Red Sox, was listening to tales of our students – not the stellar “A” students. She liked the stories of students who sometimes made unwise decisions, the ones who threw chairs on the roof or the ones who posted disrespectful posters. She liked the stories of students who had traveled with me to out-of-town events. She listened, she laughed, she asked questions, she exhorted me to help our students grow and succeed. She wasn’t judgmental. She understood that growing up is not easy. She knew that running a college isn’t easy either.

One evening, toward the end of her life, I mentioned that I looked forward to seeing her this winter in Florida. (I had learned my Florida lesson.) “I won’t be there this year,” she commented. “I won’t be around that long.” “Yes you will,” I exhorted. “No,” she said quietly. Time passed with no sound. Finally I said, “I wish we had had more time together.” “I agree,” she said. She was a realist – not the sentimentalist -- to the end. Not a bad lesson for a president.

Close to the end of her life, I was at her home in her bedroom. Her daughter was there, and we talked about politics. Mrs. H was silent. Her eyes were shut. Suddenly, out of nowhere, she entered the conversation, commenting first on Sarah Palin and then Obama’s chances of winning the election. I thought she was asleep – or at least not listening. When her daughter departed shortly thereafter, Mrs. H. turned to me and said, “Stay a little longer. Watch the Red Sox with me.” Approaching death didn’t mean she was out of touch. It meant, instead, that she was out of time and didn’t want to be alone.

News of her passing left me saddened, deeply saddened. Mrs. H and I had a late-in-life friendship that was real and intense, and I will miss her. But, my good fortune does not escape me.

My college received a transformative gift from Mrs. H. So did I.