

## **Vassar Class of 1966: Women In Between the Traditional Roles for Women and the Feminist Revolution**

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### **Abstract**

The purpose of this study is to examine the lives of the eight women who were originally interviewed for the June, 1966 *Newsweek* article in order to document the personal and professional paths that these women actually took since they graduated from college. By utilizing a case study design and subsequent personal interviews, the study was conducted to provide a better understanding of their aspirations and achievements as pioneers in the Second Wave of the Women's Movement that was just emerging as they obtained their degrees.

### **'What Role for the Educated Woman?'**

In June, 1966, the cover story of *Newsweek* posed what it clearly considered a newsworthy question: 'What Role for the Educated Woman?' To help provide an answer, the magazine's education editor held a conversation with eight women who were being graduated that year from Vassar, then still an all-women's college and one persistently conscious of itself as a pioneer in women's higher education. The magazine described the eight graduates as "exceptional" yet, expressing "the concerns of graduating seniors all over the U.S" (p.74). To 21<sup>st</sup> century ears, those concerns—at least, as elicited by the magazine's education editor—sound almost quaint: sexual attitudes, marriage, the willingness or lack of same to compete with men on the job, and what it means to be "feminine." Yet by any measure, these eight women were poised to assume just about any role they wanted at the very forefront of the society and culture in which they lived—at least among the possibilities open to women at the time.

Those possibilities, while more limited than the daughters and granddaughters of the eight would now find credible, were in fact beginning to open up in ways the graduates did not envisage in June, 1966. Perhaps as a result, the future paths the women contemplated in their *Newsweek* interview were far more pedestrian, if perhaps more secure, than the realities they actually lived.

These were the women in between. They straddled what in retrospect would be seen as a momentous dividing line in the lives of American women and in the culture of the country, and they weren't entirely at home on either side of the divide. One foot was planted in their mothers' generation, in which marriage and motherhood were the primary goals, with career accepted as a

pre-marriage phase and post-child-rearing retreat. The other foot strode forward away from those expectations, but in 1966, it still hovered in mid-air, with no firm ground on which to set down. For, unseen up ahead, was a totally altered terrain for America's women, a terrain that would be fought for, one hill at a time, in that swirling mass of "revolutions" that ignited America in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Some of these eight women helped shape the terrain—at least one from a position of leadership—but all had to find their way across it, one way or another. For that reason, perhaps more than in any other generation of our time, the lives these women have actually lived are very different from the lives they had anticipated in 1966.

The purpose of this study is to examine the lives of the eight women who were originally interviewed for the June, 1966 Newsweek article in order to document the personal and professional paths that these women actually took since they graduated from Vassar. By utilizing a detailed examination of the women, this research was conducted to provide a better understanding of their aspirations and achievements as pioneers in the Second Wave of the Women's Movement that was just emerging as they obtained their degrees. One of the original participants, a physician, was deceased and one other, a published poet, declined to participate, so the actual study included six of the original interviewees from the Newsweek article. The responses of five of the participants have been protected by confidentiality. The sixth participant, Brenda Feigen, asked to be identified and encouraged us to supplement her responses to the participant profile by using her published memoir.

The study was guided by the following research questions:

- What were the influences in the lives of the women that led them to decisions in their personal and professional lives and how did their actual paths compare to their predictions in the Newsweek article?
- In what ways, if any, were their lives influenced by the emerging women's movement?

### **Research Design**

We chose to conduct this research as a descriptive case study using qualitative methods including an in-depth participant profile survey. The use of qualitative research methods is integral to this study because it is consistent with the theory and content of the research. The

assumptions of qualitative research are based on a holistic view of research in that the researcher seeks to understand phenomena in its entirety. It begins with an inductive approach to the phenomena utilizing specific observations moving toward the development of general patterns that emerge from the study. Finally, it is based on naturalistic inquiry intended to understand phenomena in their naturally occurring settings. (Borg & Gall, 1989; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 1980; Rudestram & Newton, 1992.) The result of a qualitative approach is ‘grounded theory’ that is theory that follows the data rather than theory that precedes the data (Glaser, 1978; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Qualitative research is grounded in a philosophical position that is broadly interpretive in that it is concerned with “...how the social world is interpreted, understood, experienced or produced...based on methods of analysis, and explanation building involves understanding of complexity, detail and context” (Mason, 1996, p.4).

Feminist methodologies share many of the same values and assumptions as qualitative research. In her discussion of feminist research, Du Bois also echoed a similar theme. “To address women’s lives and experiences in their own terms, to create theory grounded in the actual experience and language of women is the central agenda for feminist social science and scholarship” (1983, p.19).

### **Survey Instrument**

Qualitative researchers view the case study as an important research method (Borg & Gall, 1989; LeCompte, Millroy & Preissle, 1992). This study utilized a descriptive cross sectional approach that included an in-depth participant profile. All potential participants were contacted by email utilizing the Vassar College Alumni services. Two of the researchers for this study were 1966 graduates of Vassar College which allowed access to the Alumni network as well as generating interest by most of the participants who knew the researchers from their years at Vassar. The initial contact outlined the purpose and the process of the study and was followed up with a telephone call to each of the women.

The survey instrument we developed consisted of 15 questions divided into three sections. Section one is focused on family and individual background information including education and employment history. Section two focuses on data related to their original

expectations as outlined in the *Newsweek* article. Section three contains questions related to their assessment of their own professional and personal choices as well as what they see as their next challenge since they are all currently in their mid-sixties. We followed up the surveys with in-depth telephone calls with each participant. The survey consisted of a mix of more direct questions that were used to gather the demographic information and a set of open ended questions to enable the participants to provide more personal responses to the researchers. Elaboration of the open ended questions was the primary focus of the telephone interviews.

## **Findings**

### ***Personal Lives***

In the 1966 article, the women saw that marriage was not an option but an inevitability. As one interviewee stated—without disagreement or dispute by the others—“I think it’s very realistic to say that I will be married very soon. I think most people here will be too.” (p.74). In 1966, discussion focused heavily on the women’s perception of the traditional family—stay-at-home mother, breadwinner husband, and children. Today, that family model represents only 25 percent of all families in the U.S with more than fifty percent of all marriages ending in divorce (Lake & Conway p. 31, 42). True to their original prediction, all six of our participants were married with two out of the six still married to their original husband. Of the remaining, four of the six divorced with three remarried in long-term second marriages and one living with a long term partner. All six had children; four with the first spouse and two second spouse.

### ***Professional Lives***

In 1966, careers for women were still seen by most people as temporary measures—time-killers until a woman’s real work of marriage and children kicked in, or unpleasant necessities in order to support a husband’s graduate studies. Even educated women were often limited in their career choices; they were nurses rather than doctors, secretaries rather than executives, and of course, they were teachers and librarians. Did the women in between feel that their career options were limitless, or did they share the sentiments of the interviewee who said in 1966: “If you do want a career, there are only a certain number of alternatives open to you. You can’t consider some things like being a full-time stockbroker, and be a housewife and mother” (p.75).

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That was the reality in the mid-1960s, yet the Vassar class of 1966 may have been the first group of women to change that reality, to begin women's march towards taking their rightful place in the highest ranks of professional life and in every corner of working life. Today, as statistics from the US Census Bureau's National Data Book confirm, women comprise 47 percent of the workforce and hold just slightly more than half of management and professional specialty positions. More than 80 percent of women aged 25 to 54 work, and most women with infants now work—53 percent of them. Nearly 48 percent of all privately held businesses in the U.S. are today 50 percent or more owned by women. In the 1960's, by contrast, only 43 percent of all women age 16 and older were workers, and only 40 percent of them worked full time. The Caucasian women were employed primarily in clerical positions and as service workers outside the home while nonwhite women held positions as private household workers. Women held less than five percent of managerial, official or proprietorship positions. The 41 million "non-working" women kept house.

While it is also true that women are still represented in small numbers in the top leadership positions—and the top earnings—in business, government, and the professions, the advances since 1966 have been tremendous, and it is the women in between who were the catalyst for those advances; it was they who first began to insist on unlimited alternatives for their work life. As stated in the *Newsweek* article, "Young women today are assuming that they eventually will be absorbed in some important work. They are looking for ways to be really creative, often for ways to make social contributions—they are planning to do things no one else is doing" (p. 68).

For five of the six women education did not stop with their graduation from Vassar. Five have graduate degrees with two of the six completing law degrees. One has a PhD and one is currently completing a PhD program. All were or are in professional jobs. Among our six participants, one is the Chair of a Department of History at a mid-western university, another practices entertainment law in California and is a published author, a third is a marriage counselor in private practice, the fourth is a college professor in Museum Education Leadership and two are retired respectively from their career as a judge and from a career in banking and real estate.

When assessing whether they realized career ambitions from 1966, the results were mixed. Two had wanted to become lawyers and they did. Two stated that in 1966, they had no idea what they actually wanted to do except for an interest in teaching. One stated that while she had several successful careers she felt that she didn't live up to her potential and ultimately made a choice to raise her children as a stay-at-home mom after "unsuccessfully" trying to balance both. The last of our participants felt restrained by dead end jobs in her original career in publishing and eventually changed careers after her divorce.

In a study done by Lake and Conway, the authors noted that "women are forsaking...models of work life that do not meet their needs and aspirations and inventing a new, more open and satisfying way of work...To a great extent this trend this has been the handiwork of the women of Generation X..." the daughters of our baby boom mothers. Like our participants, the earlier generation "tried to have it all, all at once." While our participants struggle with the choice of all or nothing, their daughters are becoming "...convinced that success at work and happiness at home are not mutually exclusive, but may require some creative sequencing" ( pp. 63-64).

### ***The Women's Movement and the Class of '66***

In June of 1966, just a couple of weeks after our participants graduated from Vassar, twenty-eight women joined together to form the National Organization for Women. NOW gave an organizational name to the still somewhat inchoate gathering of that critical mass of involved and committed women—the women's movement—that was about to effect significant and lasting change for all women. This may have been the most profound political change the women in between would witness and/or affect, but they would never really fully taste the fruits of the transformation it would bring.

There had always been women active in promoting "feminist" causes. But it was in the 1960s that it all seemed to come together. Betty Friedan's seminal book, *The Feminine Mystique*, was published in 1963; it was instantly the most read and discussed book on the Vassar campus, and it was no accident that the "hit song" in the sophomore show written and produced by the class of 1966 was called "The Feminine Mistake," a satirical look at the suppressed role of women, sung with vehement resentment. The action wasn't all cerebral.

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President Kennedy appointed a Commission on the Status of Women, and several highly visible and articulate female legislators were elected and rose to national prominence: Martha Griffiths, Edith Green, Shirley Chisholm, Patsy Mink, and Ella Grasso, among others. Groups of highly educated women who had experienced personal discrimination first-hand had learned the lessons of community activism from the civil rights movement and of political organizing from serving coffee and stuffing envelopes in election campaigns. Now they were ready to go to work on behalf of their own cause. Feminist issues were going mainstream, and by the late 1960s, groups had sprung up all over the country that focused on some aspect of the feminist agenda. Our participants were, in many ways, some of the early pioneers of that emerging movement. All six of our participants experienced barriers as working women. Two were active players in a class action discrimination suit against a major US Bank and as part of a grievance filed against a major university when all female faculty were denied tenure. Two discussed their dismay at finding themselves in dead end jobs and experiencing sexism in those jobs as well as in the hiring and promotion process. Both attorneys experienced discrimination in law school and after. For one, the discrimination she experienced at Harvard Law School was so overt that she credits it for her becoming a leader in the feminist movement. She stated “ If I sensed discrimination or a generalized hostility to women, anywhere, anytime, I had to do something about it, whatever the cost to me or my career...If I hadn’t consciously identified myself before as a feminist, my experience at Harvard Law School certainly made me aware that I was one” (Feigen, p. 24). She would eventually become the National Vice President of NOW and the director with Ruth Bader Ginsberg of the ACLU’s Women’s Rights project among several national positions she would hold.

### *Conclusions*

We asked the women to reflect on their personal and professional experiences from the perspective of “if I only knew then what I know now”. All expressed the value that they received as students at Vassar however, two stated that that they did not understand “the real world” until after college. While they both felt that their education at Vassar prepared them very well for the academic rigors of any career they would enter, they did not feel well prepared for the realities of sexism and discrimination they faced once they entered those careers. Two of the women opted to leave the workforce early due to their concern with trying to merge motherhood

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and work. Personally, several women cited the importance of following one's dream and developing as many resources and supports to help you realize one's goals. One of the women who divorced her first husband discussed the importance of marrying someone who supports one's vision. Yet, with all the challenges they faced, our six participants are eagerly looking forward to the future. Three out of six are concerned with retirement and what to do that is meaningful with the rest of their life. One is completing a PhD and looking for a new career perhaps overseas. One is still actively teaching but is currently the primary caregiver for a physically ill parent. Since her children are now grown, she admits that she and her husband's plans to travel are now on hold, but has no doubt that they will be realized. Our self-described "radical feminist is still concerned with the state of women's rights. She sees that despite the great strides there are still numerous sexual harassment lawsuits and the glass ceiling occurring at higher corporate levels.

While baby boomers were the first generation "...that pursued work as fulfillment en masse...many of them resist (traditional notions) of retirement...For them, retirement is a positive next stage of life, involving work, continuing education and activism" (Lake & Conway p. 98). Our participants often saw retirement, if they even used the word at all, as the next stage in their life. They were actively pursuing new interests and/or continuations of their current interests in new settings. "They are shifting the emphasis of retirement from being an ending to being a beginning" (Lake & Conway p. 98).

For the women in between, timing was everything. They were not to reap the full benefits of the revolution in women's rights, but they would carry the struggle and savor the triumphs. (They would also mutter disapprovingly in our interviews with them at the succeeding generation's breezy indifference to the struggle.) The women of 1966 women lived through—and to one extent or another were involved in—all the great "events" of the women's movement, from *Roe v. Wade* to the unsuccessful attempt to pass the Equal Rights amendment to the confirmation hearings of Clarence Thomas to the rise and fall of Carly Fiorina. They grew to maturity, in short, in a time when the role of women in the nation's life was changing fundamentally. They not only were impacted by the women's movement, but in many ways were an influence on highlighting the fundamental changes that would occur during the 40 plus years since their graduation in June 1966. By any standard these women have led remarkable lives. Despite

“sexism” they all excelled in their careers and exhibited a great deal of confidence in their abilities. They never saw themselves as victims and often took an active role in “righting the wrongs.” While their personal relationships were ultimately successful, most expressed concerns about trying to balance career and family. They were active participants in the movement to redefine a woman’s role in society. . They helped to shape shifting expectations of women’s lives as mothers, wives, and professionals. There is every indication that by embracing "retirement" as an opportunity to create new avenues of fulfillment for themselves, they may once again be pioneers in their generation.

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