

Karen L. Stevenson, Maryland/D.C. and Magdalen College 1979, is an attorney based in California.

Woman's Work

Karen L. Stevenson

In May of 2008, I returned to Oxford for the celebration of the 30th anniversary of the opening of the Rhodes Scholarship to women. Before that trip, I had given little thought over the years to the “meaning” of my Rhodes experience. For me, the relative significance of the Rhodes Scholarship has receded with time, pressed somewhat into the background by the demands of building a career, raising a family and growing older. I am proud to have won a Rhodes Scholarship. It definitely opened doors early on and I’m grateful for that. But everything is relative and I’m not so sure that being a Rhodes Scholar has necessarily opened some doors as widely as one might assume it would or could.

In the minds of my family and friends, winning a Rhodes Scholarship was seen as a launching point on an ever ascending trajectory towards “success” and “power”. But what, and who, define success and power? Looking back, my Rhodes experience was not so much a professional accelerant as an interlude where I began a long process of redefining success and power for myself.

That redefinition began with learning to value myself and my women friends on our own terms. That ultimately meant I learned to deeply listen to other women’s experiences, loosening a firmly held view that a woman’s success and leadership would have to look like exactly like a man’s (only without cigars and smoke-filled clubs). Most importantly, I came to value collaboration more than conquest.

I grew up in northeast Washington, D.C. in an all black neighborhood with a single mother who was a public school psychologist. No one in my family could have imagined me being a Rhodes Scholar. That was for men, and rich, white men at that - definitely not a black girl from D.C.

When our class of Rhodes women arrived at Oxford in the fall of 1979, fresh from a luxurious transatlantic crossing on the Queen Elizabeth II (that was when “Sailing Weekend” actually meant sailing!), we were greeted in Southampton on a chilly September evening and taken by bus up to Oxford. Once in Oxford, the bus unloaded five or six of us new Rhodes Scholars at the rear gate of Magdalen College. I was one of three women Scholars admitted to

Magdalen that year – the college’s first year of co-education since its founding in 1458. I was up to the challenge.

Before Oxford, I had been part of several waves of “first women,” who stormed the proverbial beachheads of formerly all-male institutions. I attended a New England boarding school where, in 1971, as a ninth grader, I was in the first group of girls admitted in 80 years to the once-all boys prep school. In 1975, I was among the first group of women to win a Morehead Scholarship to attend the University of North Carolina. The trend continued in college, where I was in the first group of women permitted to pledge the national service fraternity, Alpha Phi Omega.

In the process of breaking into these once-all male bastions, I definitely came to believe all-male places were inherently more “powerful” and somehow more “meaningful” simply because they were populated by males. I saw being a woman as a minor handicap that could be readily overcome with hard work and stamina. At the very least, the gender thing seemed easier to deal with than the treacherous complexities of race.

In that first year of coeducation at Magdalen, some of the tutors and male students were obviously unnerved having women around. They didn’t quite know what to do with us. The choices seemed to alternate between: ignore us; treat us like “one of the boys”; and/or remind us daily that coeducation was tolerable (just) but not much was really expected of us as we’d probably all marry after obtaining our degrees anyway.

I sought solace largely by avoiding the Magdalen MCR and dining hall, gravitating instead toward the camaraderie of the most interesting women I could find – among others, Shelagh S. and Catherine M. both Canadian Rhodes Scholars of my year; Lucy, a lawyer and Rhodes Scholar from Zambia; Wai Chung, from Taiwan, a physicist and accomplished pianist; and Sachi, a brilliant Japanese mathematician. Lucy, Wai Chung, and Sachi all attended Somerville, at the time an all women’s college.

Some of my fondest memories of Oxford are gloomy winter afternoons spent with this group piled into my room at Magdalen drinking tea, talking about politics, our lives and ambitions. On the last day of my exams, when students poured out of Examination Schools into the High Street to celebrate with champagne – it was Lucy, Sachi and Wai Chung who toasted me. Together, we were an odd lot, smart, accomplished women, each of us defying cultural odds just being at Oxford. These women taught me to listen.

The other lessons, I learned on the river.

In my first year at Oxford, I was invited to row with an eights crew for Worcester College. Magdalen didn't have enough interested women to field a boat and Worcester, which had also recently gone co-ed, didn't either. I had never rowed before, but having competed in women's track and field at UNC, I was fit, coordinated, and loved a challenge.

Being the inaugural crew, we didn't row in a good shell -- no way. We started with an ancient wooden clunker that the Worcester men's eight had abandoned for a swift, modern fiberglass shell. Our boat was a bucket but we didn't care. We wanted to row and were glad just to have a boat at all. Every day, I ran from Magdalen with its monstrous gargoyles and hushed cloisters across a postcard gorgeous Christ Church Meadow to the Boathouses for practice.

I was a complete beginner. I think I had seen rowing on television a few times during Olympic telecasts, but that was about it. The Worcester women, six Brits and one other American, did not care. My value to the team was measured more by potential than experience. That was the first lesson. Since I was tall and strong, they put me at the five position, right in the center of the boat.

We rowed in the clunker through a long, cold winter season, gradually gaining speed and proficiency as a team. In the spring, a miracle happened. A Worcester alumnus donated a new, even faster shell to the Worcester College men's eight and the women got handed down the men's fiberglass shell, *The Lady Briggs*. We couldn't believe our good fortune. The boat was beautiful, glistening black, trimmed with a thin stripe of pink. The seats glided smoothly. The footholds were secure and easy to use. Even the oars were elegant -- black blades with a pink Maltese cross painted on their tips.

When our team was dressed out for competition in black T-shirts with pink Maltese crosses emblazoned across our chests, black shorts, black knee length socks with pink trim, and rowing at our best in the *Lady Briggs*, we looked and felt invincible.

At its best, rowing is a meditation in focus, unity and strength. All eight women must be fiercely committed to unison of stroke. Rowing requires collaboration of a very high order. Rugged individualism has no place in a shell. That was the second lesson.

I remember the thrill of the boat lifting beneath us when our blades gripped the water and snapped back in perfect unison sending the shell surging up the river, leaving huge puddles where eight oars had been. Few sounds are more satisfying than the synchronous thump of eight oars falling in the oarlocks as one. After five hundred meters of easy pacing, then the

coxswain's command: "Power ten!" In a sudden, singular response the cadence rises. The pace quickens. The boat flies.

Our Worcester squad never bickered, rarely socialized together outside the Boathouse, didn't shop, swap clothes, or "hang out" together. We never talked about men. We rowed. We ran. We hurt. We tended blistered and calloused palms, rain or shine, without complaint.

By Summer Eights 1980, Oxford's inter-college spring regatta, our women's eight was formidable. During the four-day regatta, the boats start each day in staggered positions along the river, each several boat lengths apart, stretched out along the 2500-meter course. At the gun, each crew rows furiously off the start trying to overtake the boat immediately ahead of it before the boat behind catches your team. Every boat you overtake is called a "bump." That spring, we were never caught. We got four bumps in four days. Elation.

Because we got four bumps, we also got to keep our oars. The name of each rower is hand painted on my blade: Bow – J.D. Gurney, 2. J.A. Leighton, 3. F.I. Sutcliffe, 4. C.M. O'Sullivan, 5. K. L. Stevenson, 6. R.M. Wetenhall, 7. K.C. Bucknell, and Stroke – C.C. Price. Also on the blade, just to the left of the Worcester College crest is the list of the boats that we bumped: Linacre, St. Catherine's II, St. Hughes, and Somerville II. For our efforts, the next year the Worcester women would start four places higher on the river, with the ultimate goal being to claim the number one spot and the title, "Head of the River."

I still have my oar – not just the blade, but the entire oar – in my home in Los Angeles. Friends often ask why on earth I bothered to lug such a massive trinket across the Atlantic and from house to house through the years. That oar reminds me of a time and place where every afternoon I was drawn away from trying to be one of the guys, away from feeling the need to defend my intellect and justify my academic existence, and into joyous, purposeful friendship with smart, ambitious women who never talked about being smart or ambitious. We just did the work.

When I had to select a college after winning the Rhodes, I never gave serious consideration to any of the all-women's colleges. At the time, I wanted a college that others would immediately recognize as a center of power, with the gravitas of masculinity, thus giving my work an imprimatur of legitimacy by the simple fact of having once been an all male institution. In the years since Oxford, however, I have often thought that if I had it to do over again, I would choose the road not taken and attend one of the formerly all women's colleges.