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features

A Woman's World

France Griggs Sloat

The door to the first-floor women's restroom in Alter Hall flings open, and Patty LaGrange barges in. She walks over to the flimsy couch in the front room and settles in, waiting for her fellow freshman classmates, Mary Ellen Harkins and Jean Klingenberg.

They're meeting her here, like they do every day—before going to class, before going to the Grille, before going anywhere on the Xavier campus. It's an odd place, estranged from the rest of campus, but it's their refuge from the world outside.

It's winter of 1966, and the three are among a tiny handful of women attending day classes with the 3,000-member, otherwise all-male student body.

Here, in the bathroom with the pink cement block walls and convenient shelf to hold their makeup, they gather for safety, community and support. Here they study together before class and share stories of their experiences on campus, where they are almost always the lone females in classes of men. They're here because there isn't any other place at Xavier for women day students to go.

The University won't officially admit women as day students for another three years, but a few—the early integrators—are allowed to attend day classes as commuter students through the Evening College, usually because their parents are Xavier employees. For LaGrange, it just made sense to come to Xavier. While her sisters and friends took off for more traditional all-women colleges, she chose Xavier because of the free tuition. Her father, Glen LaGrange, is a psychology professor, and she's one of seven children. So saving money is a priority. But she didn't realize until she arrived on campus just how difficult it would be. And this day would be no different.

Smoothing the neat, wool pantsuit she's wearing to guard against the chilly winter day, she says goodbye to her friends and heads out of the lounge and off to class. But as she settles into her assigned seat in the lecture hall, the instructor, a Jesuit priest, calls her out. She goes rigid as he chastises her for violating the dress code, which specifies only skirts and dresses for women.

No pants.

After the scolding, she sits mum through the class, embarrassed and unsure, feeling ever more an outsider in a foreign world.

That was 40 years ago. Though LaGrange and her colleagues suffered other embarrassing moments navigating the new role they found themselves thrust into, their efforts paved the way for a new Xavier where today, women are free to dress however they wish—in shorts,



slacks, sleeveless shirts and sandals—without fear of reprimand from authoritative figures. They're also free to choose any course of study, run for student government, form a club, try out for a sport and compete for scholarships.

Xavier today is a different place. It's come a long way from those difficult days of transition paved by LaGrange and her colleagues, who were viewed by some as intruders in a sanctuary of men. It has become in many ways a woman's world. And so has nearly every college in the U.S. In LaGrange's freshman year, two and a half million women attended college, compared to four million men. Gender-segregated colleges were common, particularly in Catholic higher education. By 2004, however, nine million women were in college compared to seven million men, with 57 percent of those earning bachelor's degrees and 58 percent of those earning master's degrees being women.

It's the same at Xavier. Women students now outnumber men, nearly half the full-time faculty are women, and women make up more than half the full-time staff.

The University, as a result, has been forced to change, and it's done so by placing women's issues at the forefront in various ways—confronting issues such as sexual harassment and gender discrimination; adding and expanding services for women at the health center; addressing academically the unique pressures and challenges confronting professional women today, including the addition of a gender and diversity studies program. And just last year, the University hired Cheryl Nuñez to fill the newly created position of vice provost for diversity, which addresses gender issues as well as race.

But there's more. This year, a Women's Initiative is beginning to cultivate alumnae to be leaders, benefactors and active participants—a direct result of the number of women graduates gaining on men. And the University is opening a women's center in the former campus security house where all of these issues—and more—can be brought together and discussed. In doing so, it's correcting what many women say was a major mistake made 26 years ago that set the University back substantially in terms of its recognition of and support for the advancement of women.

The University had a women's center, known as Breen Lodge, from 1972 until 1980, when it was abruptly closed. For eight years, the lodge was a popular gathering place for talks, seminars and the Free University, a women's center program that offered free courses on different topics of the day. It taught auto mechanics to women and operated a weekly radio talk show that explored women's issues.

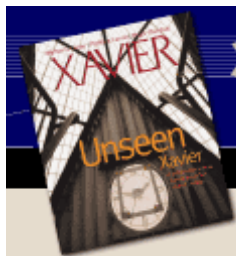
After Breen closed, petitions circulated for years calling for its revival. In 2005, with such calls from students and faculty reaching a peak, University administrators agreed it was time.

The new center has three primary functions: to provide a safe space where women can find support, networking and collaboration; to offer resources and referrals for health care, advocacy, counseling, and educational and career development; and to promote and sponsor policies, programs and events that explore issues particular to women.

"It should not be interpreted as an indication that Xavier is a hostile environment for women," says Nuñez, the new vice provost for diversity. "Rather, it is precisely because Xavier has made so many positive strides in addressing women's presence, issues and interests that a center is called for to give greater coherence, coordination and visibility to those efforts. This is yet another symbol of our institutional commitment to equity."

Going to college isn't all that easy for anyone. The women who arrived in the late 1960s bore the additional burden of being first. "It was not impossible to succeed, but you had to be really sure of yourself and confident in your abilities," says Kandi Stinson, associate vice president for academic affairs. "You were not going to get a lot of external validation of yourself and being told that you're capable and bright. It's hard to integrate a place. You have to be better than average when you're in the minority. The early integrators have that burden on them. They are a test, and if they fail, it's harder for others to follow."

It was still that way for Stinson when she was hired with a cohort group of 10 women in 1987 as a tenure track professor of political science. She not only had to prove she was as good as her male colleagues, she had to excel to get positive notice—and do it in a virtual vacuum as the handful of women professors were scattered across campus.



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It's better for women today, she says, but they still face many challenges that men don't. Women in general are more likely than men to experience poverty and violent crime. More women are raising children alone. And women still lag behind men in educational attainment, employment, income and professional status.

Such pressures take their toll physically, too, leading to a greater need for women's health services. In addition to offering more gynecological services to women, the McGrath Health and Counseling Center is handling its share of women students suffering from eating disorders such as anorexia. Many women struggle with body image issues, and McGrath has seen an increase in women students with eating disorders in the last few years. There were six in the first half of last year alone, says Dr. James Konerman, medical director at McGrath.

Women students also deal with increasing incidents of sexual harassment and assault—as they do on most colleges campuses in the U.S. The University is responding with updated discipline policies, an emergency hotline, round-the-clock advocacy assistance and student orientation sessions about dating and sexual power issues.

"Despite the real progress, there still remain a number of obstacles women face," she says. But she notes the focus on women is expanding. For example, the faculty is proposing to increase the number of gender and diversity studies credits within the required core curriculum. The women's center will address all these issues. But it will also reach out to men.

"It's a women's center, but it's going to serve all students, including male students," says Luther Smith, dean of students and assistant vice president for student life. "There will be educational opportunities for young men to learn what their responsibility is in making a safer, more accepting environment and what they can do to stop issues like rape and advocate more on women's issues."

In February, LaGrange returned to the University to give a presentation for a gender and diversity forum about her early days on campus. She talked about how hard it was at first—the ugly "You don't belong here" comments from guys and the professors who would invite her to leave the classroom because of the sensitive nature of their lecture topic. Once she was asked to leave an English class because they were viewing etchings containing partial nudity. She declined.

Another time, when she questioned a grade as her male classmates had done, the professor asked her to stop by his office to discuss the grade in private, an invitation he had not offered the men. She declined that, too.

"I had a professor whose simple line was that women didn't belong in the University but at home pregnant and barefoot in the kitchen making meatloaf. I could never tell how much he was kidding and looking for debate or how much was serious, but he certainly and consistently put down women," LaGrange says.

There were great moments, too, such as when a group of freshman guys sat with her and her girlfriend at a football game to thwart ugly comments by upperclassmen sitting a few rows

above. To the University's credit, she says, much of the harassment stopped after her first year, especially as she became involved in activities like student council. In fact, as events like Martin Luther King's and Bobby Kennedy's assassinations, the Vietnam War and the Kent State killings took place, the presence of women became less of an issue. Everyone was focusing on the outside world. "Being a woman didn't matter anymore," she says.

By the time she graduated in 1970, the dress code was gone, she was living in a women's dorm, and women were pouring in to take their place on campus. By 1980, women students outnumbered men and have ever since. This year is no different. The new freshman class is 56 percent women and 44 percent men—something LaGrange could never have fathomed in 1966 when she and her girlfriends faced freshman year alone.

"I don't think I ever realized fully what I was getting into," she says. "I just wanted to be a student. I didn't feel like an integrator at all. We just hid in the ladies room and went to class and tried to make it work for us."

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