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Op-Eds

Working for Women in the Signet

By Martin H. Kaplan

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If you don't count the 'Cliffies serving lunch—one of whom later headed a major Hollywood studio—there were no women in the Signet when I became president in 1970.

Actually there were almost no undergraduate members at all. The war in Vietnam cast a shadow on Cambridge. Automatic student deferments had been abolished, and only a lucky lottery number stood between Harvard men and the draft. Storybook life in the Yard had given way to a stormy succession of protests, strikes, occupations, busts, tear gas, wrenching debates, bitter confrontations with University leadership, and trashed and boarded-up windows on Mass. Ave. and Mt. Auburn Street: hardly a friendly climate for sherry sipping, lit'ry lunches and aspirational roses. The number of incoming Signet members in each new cohort skittered close to zero. At one dismal election, I recall someone asking, "What is the point?" Recourse to answers like Shelley's—"Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world"—seemed haplessly inadequate.

Not only did the Signet appear to be blithely irrelevant to the moral churning in the larger world; it seemed out of touch even with the change occurring at Harvard. In my freshman year, we Harvard men had to wear coats and ties to meals. When women came as dinner guests to the Freshman Union (now the Barker Center), a wave of fork-on-water-glass clinking—Look! A woman!—would sweep the room. When women visited us in our dorm rooms, it was only during strict "parietal hours," a few days a week, doors open—and keep three feet on the floor, please. The Houses were all all-male.

But by my junior year, some of the Houses were conducting "experiments" in co-residential living, and some intrepid Harvard men opted to move to Radcliffe. I was on The Crimson; they had women editors. I was on The Advocate; they had women editors. It struck me that the least the Signet could do to shake off its somnolence

and notice the revolution beyond its Dunster Street door was to break with the Society's indefensible exclusion of women as members. So early in 1971, I put the question to as many undergraduates as I could corral, and the outcome was a unanimous vote of approval. I made the same pitch to admit women at The Lampoon, where I was also president, and the response was also the same. We would revise our rules for membership and join the modern world.

A couple of days after the Signet vote, Professor Walter Kaiser, who chaired one of the Signet's boards, urgently summoned me to a meeting at his home, which I recall thinking was the most elegant I had ever been inside. Graciously, but with unmistakable iron, he informed me that Professor Mason Hammond, who chaired another of the Signet's boards, was apoplectic about what we had done. (I can't remember whether that word was his, or my interpretation of his.) The cause of outrage was procedural; our rash undergraduate action had ridden roughshod over the Signet's by-laws, jeopardizing the tax-exempt status of the Society and threatening its very existence.

I don't recall even hinting during that tense encounter with Professor Kaiser—which actually initiated a friendship—that Professor Hammond and other livid associates might be using a parliamentary argument as cover for their objection to admitting women, and I had no reason to think that was true, except for pretty much everything else I had observed about Harvard's old guard since I had arrived at the College. So instead of litigating the merits of a co-ed Signet, and wondering how much trouble (like torpedoing my pending applications for various scholarships) I had gotten myself into, I determined to hold fast to our goal but to expunge every procedural irregularity from our little revolt.

It worked. A number of meetings and do-overs later, Tina Rathborne became the first woman elected as an undergraduate member of the Signet.

While all this was roiling, the Signet held a centennial gala. Attendance was so robust that the dinner took place in a banquet hall hung with Rothkos at the top of Holyoke Center. Erich W. Segal '58 was the toastmaster, and Kurt Vonnegut was the speaker. Also speaking were John H. Updike '54, the recipient of the Signet Award, and the poet of the evening, Allen Ginsberg. As president, and also as one of the evening's speakers, I was seated between them. I remember asking Updike during the dinner—successfully, it turned out—if he would write the Foreword to a Lampoon centennial anthology I was editing. I also remember Ginsberg's non-stop Om-ing; it was like the revving of a Buddhist Harley. But mainly I remember wondering how my own remarks would go over, since (as I discovered, listening to the other speakers, all of whom preceded me) what I had to say was much less lighthearted, much more earnest and—as far as Harvard's politics and policies were concerned—not entirely loving.

I got the only standing ovation of the evening, and what I said turned out to be what I also said at Commencement, where I gave the English Oration in Tercentenary Theater. Over my gown, like many of my classmates, I wore a white armband bearing a red equal sign, signifying our call for the College to admit equal numbers of men and women freshmen, instead of the 4-to-1 ratio that was then the rule. A few feet from where I stood, sitting in the 400-year-old ceremonial chair of his office, was outgoing president Nathan M. Pusey '28. A few years later, he was quoted in Harvard Magazine saying that my class—1971—was Harvard's worst class ever, which is why ever since, the unofficial regalia worn as a badge of honor at our reunions by many of my classmates bears the acronym WCE.

After dessert at that Signet dinner, a bunch of us, including Updike and Ginsberg, walked from Holyoke Center down Plympton Street to the Lampoon Castle. Only men were present; Patty Marx, the first woman on the Lampoon, would be elected the next fall. Upstairs in the Great Hall, Ginsberg took out a blue felt-tip and filled a page of a Lampoon Common Book. "Signet-Lampoon," he put next to his signature. I included what he wrote and drew that night in the Lampoon anthology. For me it's a memento of three venerable institutions—the Signet, the Lampoon, and Harvard itself—on the brink of what seems in retrospect to have been an almost inconceivably postponed evolution.

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