

Peddie

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CHRONICLE



In Her Own Shoes

An alumna finds a family at Peddie

For a self-professed introvert, Sharon Evans '63 speaks with remarkable candor as she recounts her Peddie experience, both as a student and at present. At times, her soft Virginia accent takes on an edge — fair enough, as she is telling the story of growing up with the challenge of gender dysphoria.

After years of struggling to coalesce the disparity between her appearance from birth and the woman she knew she was internally, Evans elected to transition to female in the late '70s. She now lives a vibrant and peaceful life that includes travel, often to visit Peddie.

But while a student in the late '50s and early '60s, Sharon — then Bill — felt that disparity keenly.

"It was a very uncomfortable experience, vis-à-vis the gender dysphoria, which I noticed when I was five years old," she said. "I felt I wasn't 'right' somehow — that what I was thinking of myself versus what I was seeing of myself just didn't jive.

"So here I am at an all-boys' school. I have a mind that's strongly telling me I'm female, and I'm trying to exist in a man's world. It was very strange. Add in the fact that I'm a loner. I had a few close friends. But the turmoil — the war inside of me — was ever-present and tainted pretty much everything. At times, I was very depressed."

Evans affectionately remembers some of her extracurricular activities and dorm living. But after graduation, due to her unresolved internal conflict, she felt ambivalent about Peddie.

"I was torn about the school," she said. "I came back for an event when I was a college sophomore, when I was asked to talk to students about what college was like. After that, I pulled back."

It wasn't until after Evans transitioned and reconnected with some of her classmates from the Class of 1963 that she entertained the idea of coming back for her 20th Reunion. By 1983, school leaders knew she had transitioned ("I had sent them a copy of my changed birth certificate."), so the foundation for a smooth return was well laid.

"I had been interacting with a few people in the class and had gotten positive feedback," she said. "I thought, 'I'm going to do it and see what happens.' I was coming back as Sharon. Some of the professors I knew as a student were still there. And I walked into that reunion."

Wearing a red dress, no less.

Evans had a wonderful time that weekend laughing, catching up and dancing with her classmates — even slow dancing cheek-to-cheek.

"None of us, not even Sharon, would deny that a very real part of the allure of our 20th Reunion was coming back to meet her," wrote classmate and journalist Mike Duffy in a column for the Detroit Free Press (July 10, 1983). "Coming back to watch Sharon watching us watching her. She loved it, too. But here's the best part. No one went flippo. No one turned into a jerk because of gender stress."

Evans largely chalks up her positive experience at the reunion to feeling at peace with herself at last.

"Once you go through transition — if you're lucky — you start feeling complete. Like, 'Now I am who I am supposed to be,' said Evans. "There was no mental war going on inside of me. I was comfortable in my shoes. So I thought, 'What the heck?'"

"One of the most butch, masculine sports guys gave me a great big hug and big kiss," she laughed. "And I'm like, 'Wow!' They understood and accepted me. And



ON PEDDIE IN THE EARLY '60S:

"Back then, we did movies every Saturday night on campus, in Geiger-Reeves, because we couldn't go to town to the movie theater. I was the primary projectionist."

"Sophomore year, I lived in Wilson Hall, in the room with all the steam pipes. And it was so hot in there in the winter that we had all the windows open and the fans going. It might have been five degrees outdoors. In the fall and spring, that room was unbearable."

ever since then, there's never been a problem."

Another welcome twist: Evans's circle of friends has expanded in ways she didn't anticipate.

"Most of the people I'm interacting with now, I never thought of interacting with when I was a student," she said. "Mike Duffy. Arthur Brown. Roger Burns. '83 pulled me back in. It was very accepting, especially within the Class of '63."



“It was exhilarating. That’s the only word I can use.”

Sharon Evans, on remembering Blue & Gold Chapel (November 2019)

ON AN AFFIRMING TRANSITION:

“I like to think of things as predetermined, of things telling you what you should be doing. Here’s an example: After I transitioned, my driver’s license expired, so I needed a new one. There was a young girl there. She took the picture, and I’d already had my name legally changed. And she said, ‘Would you like me to change the designation for your gender on the driver’s license?’ And I said, ‘Yeah!’ This is the kind of stuff that, to me, means you’re doing what you need to do. When I had the birth certificate changed, it was in a closed hearing in front of a judge. It took five minutes. He said, ‘All right, done. Your old birth certificate is hereby sealed.’

“All the way through all of this, things have happened that are affirming. No problems with work. I was a registered nurse for 35 years. As far as I can tell, I don’t have any problems being accepted by people, especially strangers. They don’t have any concept of me being anything but female. And at Peddie, total acceptance.”

student. It was a sense of ‘Wow, this is a place that I’m so happy I belong to.’”

Today, as an avid Peddie social media follower, Bell Society member, One Peddie campaign advocate and volunteer, Evans is one of the school’s most engaged alumni. “Peddie has drawn me in, right from ‘83 on,” she said. “I’m able to contribute within my means to the school. And I hope to keep participating. I’m actively involved in the women at Peddie group, We Soar.”

What’s more, Peddie’s welcoming spirit helps to assuage this loner’s inhibitions. “I like coming back,” she said. “It’s one of the few places I come where I actually do socialize with people.”

To wit, at the campaign celebration last spring, “I was with a bunch of people and I had no idea who they were,” Evans said. “And I was trying to get myself to interact with them because we have a common bond: Peddie and One Peddie.

“Peddie gives me a feeling of belonging, of family,” she said. “The bottom catchline is the love and acceptance of this school for their students and alumni — no matter what.”

The trans community has an expression called ‘deadnaming,’ defined as using the pronoun of the person before they transitioned. “The he of me went with that transition,” said Evans. “That’s dead. At the time, some of my classmates had trouble with that, but over the years, that’s gone away too.”

Evans was elated when she learned of Peddie’s 2021 decision to convert Trask Dormitory to All-Gender Housing (“I was like, ‘YES!’”).

In November 2019, Evans visited Peddie for Blair Week and took in several pre-game celebrations, including the

high-octane hullabaloo that is Blue and Gold Chapel. When she was a student, if there were any women in the chapel, they were the teachers’ wives, she said. At this event, it was a rare treat not only to be in the chapel with so many girls and women, but to cheer along with them to boot.

“I went with (Director of Gift Planning) Anne DeMesa and sat down in the back,” she remembered. “And after things started up a little, I’m like, ‘I can’t stay here. I have to go down front.’ The original reason is because I wanted to take some pictures. But then I felt drawn in by it, probably more so than I felt when I was here as a