TIES THAT BIND

Something profound happens when a young woman arrives at Saint Ben’s. You might not be able to see it. It’s subtle at first, and then builds like a sunrise. She’s become forever, fundamentally, inextricably part of a sacred sisterhood.

It’s fitting that Saint Ben’s was founded by a community of Sisters who believed in living, learning and growing together. Bennies know that family isn’t always defined by DNA. It’s marked by shared experiences and common values. It’s why two people can just know what the other is thinking and recall the exact time and place on campus they were when…well, let’s just say some stories are best left between Bennies.

SUSTAINING THE CONNECTION

Think of the ways in which you stay in touch with your Bennie classmates. Email? Phone? Text message? Facebook? How about maintaining a regular handwritten letter correspondence for more than 60 years? That’s how 14 women from the class of 1942 chose to nourish their Bennie connections. They graduated in the midst of World War II, only a few months after the attack on Pearl Harbor. In that time, only a few months after the attack on Pearl Harbor.

And so, a “round-robin” letter was born. In fact, it was a package of letters that traveled the country, carrying stories of war and marriages and careers and babies. Lots of babies. (These are the mothers of the baby boom generation.) When one woman received the package, she removed the letter she wrote last, penned a new one and sent the package along to the next woman in the group.

“Now that was happiness,” said letter writer Patricia Coyne Kast ’42. “Just to see the large manila envelope — to recall our days together, to share the joys of motherhood, to compare notes on our careers.”

It’s worth repeating: the treasured practice endured for more than six decades. “[It’s] like having a dozen sisters with whom you can discuss anything,” said letter writer Peggy Mollner Race ’42.

Still with us? There’s more. Mary Louise’s mother, Rose Nangl Reilly, graduated from Saint Benedict’s Academy in 1901 — 12 years before CSB was founded. Rose is the great-grandmother of Maria Opitz ’91, whose mother Maureen Opitz works in donor relations at Saint Ben’s and whose father is a CSB/SJU professor of English. Genetic connections are prevalent at CSB, to be sure, but they’re just one part of the Bennie lineage.

As a student, Maria Opitz wrote an article about S. Vivia Nangl (circa 1897), who was a colleague to S. Mariella Gable, English faculty member and namesake of Gable Hall and the Sister Mariella Gable award. The award is given to emerging authors, including Tracy K. Smith. Smith isn’t a Bennie, but she is now a part of the Bennie connection Maria Opitz will carry with her for life.

Mary Louise Reilly Merickel ’42

letter writer

had four daughters who graduated from CSB

Mary Botz Vos ’42,

letter writer

had one daughter who graduated from CSB

Kathleen Yanes Waynes ’42,

letter writer

and one of the first African-American students at CSB

Pat Vos Krueger ’70

Josephine Zehnle Terwey ’39

letter writer

had four daughters graduate from CSB

Mary Botz Vos 

Kathy Rajkowski Kampa ’75

letter writer

had a sister who graduated from CSB

Polly Merickel ’76

Betty J Schneider ’39

(letter friend of Kathleen Yanes Waynes ’42) founded a Chicago non-profit that would later merge CSB alums daughters over the years

Susie Henningsen

letter writer

had a brother Frank, who married Donna Coyne (letter writer)

Karen Eickelman ’42

letter writer

had a brother Frank, who married Donna Coyne (letter writer)

Rosemary Rajkowski Eckelmann ’42

letter writer

had a brother Frank, who married Donna Coyne (letter writer)

Kathy Rajkowski Kampa ’75

letter writer

had four daughters who attended CSB

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YOU’RE PART OF THIS

Are you imagining and mapping out your own network of connections? Wonderful! That’s the idea. We invite you to think about your own life; who have you met because you are a Bennie? Perhaps it’s a neighbor, colleague, best friend or spouse.

Perhaps you’ll start with your roommates, or the women with whom you studied abroad or your favorite professor. One thing is for sure: your Bennie network is limitless.

Visit www.csbcentennial.com to share the stories of your Saint Ben’s alums. It’s an extraordinary thing that we share, and it’s worth celebrating.

Once you’re a Bennie, the connections are unbreakable.

BY | ELLEN HUNTER GANS ’05

College of Saint Benedict Magazine