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Coming Home, Fifty Years Later!

BY VARICK A. CHITTENDEN

For one long-awaited weekend, beginning May 30th, they came—from Albuquerque and Albany, Boise and Brooklyn, Wiscasset and Watertown. Those travelling farthest flew in from Alsace, the Channel Islands, and Alaska; others are as close as Potsdam, Madrid, and Canton. The 50th reunion for St. Lawrence University's Class of 1963, my own class, was a great homecoming.

Of the 307 who graduated 50 years ago, 85 classmates and about 40 guests came. Most have lived rather ordinary, predictable lives—as lawyers, dentists, doctors, financiers, ad men, bankers, and teachers. But there was a geophysicist, a physical therapist, a B&B innkeeper, a travel agent, a nuclear engineer, a children's book author, and an interior decorator among us. Some have enjoyed more celebrity: Steve Bull was a personal assistant to President Nixon in the White House; John Bennett Perry has acted on stage, television, and in movies (in the 1970s, he was the clean-shaven sailor in Old Spice commercials and is better known today as actor Matthew Perry's father!); and Ron Mason, now retired as Michigan State University's athletic director, became the winningest head coach in college hockey history. Most are and have been active in their communities. Many brought photos of their proudest achievements—children, grandchildren, even great-grandchildren—to share. And everyone had stories to tell.

There were fond recollections of Professor "Doc" Delmage and Shakespeare class; hockey and baseball coach George Menard, a strict disciplinarian and great role model for young men; and the Laurentian Singers' conductor and mentor "Poppa G" [Richard Gilbert] and the chorus's trips to perform around the country. There were funny stories about Dean of Women Doris Stout's strict curfews and dress codes for freshman women, of sneaking trays out of the cafeteria for sledding down Library Hill on wintry nights, and of "boonies"—off-campus parties with blankets and six-packs on weekends. A very successful private equity fund manager (and, recently, a University trustee) recalled going to Connie

Barr's bar and grill on Friday nights where local farmers bought him a sandwich and Carling Black Label beer because he was so poor when he was a student. A city girl from Philadelphia described her first ever ski lesson from classmate and champion skier CB Vaughn. A fraternity man and star athlete remembered "watching some of the toughest men I have ever known

get emotional on graduation day as they said goodbye to brothers and friends." He added, "I, of course, remained cool and detached!"

With all the good times, and even hilarious moments, there were solemn moments, too. The optimism of our youth has been tempered with unplanned experiences: divorces, deaths of spouses or children, failed careers or businesses, and other tragedies have come to too many. We learned that 42 of our classmates had died, some very young. At least three, with lives full of promise when we first knew them, died much too soon by suicide. A significant number of men served in the military, some with several tours of duty in Vietnam. One, Air Force Captain Terry Forbes, was killed in action in 1967, at 26, when his plane was shot down. And too many have suffered disability and life-threatening diseases, including dementia and other mental illnesses. But the human spirit usually triumphs over loss and suffering, and that surely was evident on our Reunion weekend.

There is something very special about 50th class reunions. Many of us hadn't seen one another in a long time and, who knows if we will ever see each other again? Unlike our 10th reunion when we were just getting started in real adult life, or our 25th when we had chalked up some experiences but had



Retired anesthesiologist Dr. Alan Pritchard of Sodus, NY, Class of '63, recapturing moments of "freshman orientation," beanie and all, in St. Lawrence's 2013 Reunion parade. Photo by Tara Freeman/St. Lawrence University.

years ahead to look forward to more, this was different. Consciously or not, we are now more aware of our own mortality and that of those around us.

The four brief days of our reunion was a time for genuine celebration and reflection. We renewed friendships first made in the curious, even isolated world of college life—as sorority sisters and fraternity brothers, teammates, lab partners, or roommates. Strangely enough, we also saw, in a new light, people we had barely known, and came to appreciate them more for who they are now. Despite our different the paths traveled, I think I can speak for all of our gratitude for a good liberal arts education that prepared us for the world, for interesting and committed professors, coaches and mentors to show us the way, for Canton and the North Country to call home (at least for four years), and for friendships that will continue to enrich us for the rest of our lives. ▼

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