

# **Alumnae Achievement Awards**

**September 2011**

**Dorothy Orgill Kirsch '55**

**Rie Meriwether Godsey '77**



The 2011 Alumnae Achievement Award recipients, Dot Orgill Kirsch '55 (center left) and Rie Meriwether Godsey '77 (center right), with President John E. Klein (far right) and Susan Klein (far left) after the awards ceremony on September 17, 2011

*President John E. Klein's opening remarks*

Welcome alumnae and guests, faculty, staff, and students to the 2011 Alumnae Achievement Awards presentation. I want to give a special welcome also to Dr. Bill Quillian and his daughter Anne, Muriel Zimmerman Casey, and Skip and Tina Kughn.

Tonight we are recognizing the contributions and commitment of two distinguished women. It is my privilege to introduce to you the 2011 recipients, **Dot Orgill Kirsch**, class of 1955, and **Rie Meriwether Godsey**, class of 1977. I note that both are Odds.

This award has been presented by the College for over 30 years to an impressive roster of women. It is conferred upon selected alumnae who personify the value of a liberal arts education and have brought distinction to themselves and to the College. Nominations for the awards come from alumnae and alumni, and the recipients are selected by an awards committee. Since the recipients have to be out of college for 10 years, we have not yet given the award to any Randolph College alumni.

The past Alumnae Achievement Award recipients are listed on a plaque in the Anne Jeter Ribble Lounge in Smith Hall. It is completely full—and we have started a second plaque to contain the names of the newest recipients. A binder of photos and remarks made by past recipients is kept on a table below the plaques, so that you may learn about their careers, accomplishments, and stories. Two of our prior recipients, Mary Martin Davis Bowen '57 and Stephanie Pope '75 are here with us tonight.

Earlier today we kicked off the Year of Engagement with a jazz band, festive food and drink, and a gift registry. **As of dinner tonight, we have nearly a 100% commitment from those attending Council to be engaged with the College! Thank you.**

As Susan and I were chatting with alums and students this afternoon, it struck me that each of this year's Achievement Award recipients is an exemplar of engagement in another sense.

*Introduction of Dot Orgill Kirsch*

For decades **Dot Orgill Kirsch '55** has been engaged with zoos, the arts, and community enrichment in Memphis. Her college roommate, Sara Scott Hargrove '55, recently described Dot as “friendly, welcoming, and enthusiastic about everything.” After reading the long list of Dot's hobbies, volunteerism, and board service, I would say that she is engaged in life!

A typical week for Dot is filled with commitments at the Humane Society or at the Memphis Zoo. She serves on the Zoological Society board and assists behind the scenes with the keepers. As a docent animal presenter for over 10 years, she interacts with the public at exhibits, gives guided tours, and assists with educational classes and special events, as well as a variety of other activities that aid the Zoo in fulfilling its mission. “After 25 years with the zoo,” Dot said, “basically, if they need it done, I've done it, and enjoyed almost every challenge.”

Youth programs and the Fine Arts are also meaningful for Dot. She invests substantial time and effort volunteering with the Community Foundation of Memphis, Playhouse on the Square, Theatre Memphis, Ballet Memphis, St. Mary's Episcopal School, and as past president of both the Symphony League and the Junior League of Memphis.

As with many of our alumnae, Dot is a lifelong learner and has taken classes at the University of Memphis, Rhodes College, and Cumberland Theological School.

For the College, Dot has served as the Memphis chapter president, as a class Reunion giving leader, and as a planned giving representative assisting with fundraising. Dot has been a loyal and generous donor.

When asked about advice she might offer to our students, Dot said, "Become involved at whatever level you can. Contribute to your college—contribute money when you can. Volunteering is often as valuable as writing a check. Do what you love and make a difference in any area of your community."

Dot has made a difference in her community—using her liberal arts education and philanthropy as her lens on the world. Thank you, Dot for being with us this weekend.

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*Remarks by Dot Orgill Kirsch*

Oh Wow. This is awesome. I want to tell you what—I'm going to tear up. This school means more to me than I could probably ever tell you. When I was asked to—when I was told I was going to get the award—at first I went "Oh well, you know, I've had to do a speech, I've done that," and then I started thinking about my memories here. And I really went into a sort of nirvana. You know, the first moment I put my foot on Randolph-Macon, I thought, "I'll be here for four years." It's probably the most wonderful place I've ever been.

The four years I spent here have meant so much to me. My freshman year, Dr. Theodore Jack was president of the College and in his instruction to us, he spoke of Macon and said "this peculiar institution" meaning, you know, significant, out of the ordinary, wonderful—which was totally true. Now, I remember going home and I said "I go to that peculiar school in Lynchburg."

What I want to talk to you about is a teacher I had—and I had wonderful teachers. My senior year, I took art history. We had a wonderful new professor, Dr. Mary Williams, at that time, and I took her art history course. I was totally visually incompetent. There were all kinds of art down the hall that I never looked at. From the first moment I walked into that class, she captured my attention. She was so brilliant, so wonderful, and so amazingly had the ability to communicate to her students; I can remember her first lecture! I took that course—which was hard as you can believe—and then, fortunately, I was able to take American painting second semester, which was a very small class, which was absolutely wonderful. There were about five of us, mostly art majors except for yours truly.

One of the first things she said, “Well I want to tell you what we’re gonna have as your difficulty and we’re going to have a number of artists and you’re going to pick an artist and you’re going to have to lead the class. I almost had to call that harassment. She went on to say—and this is what is probably, I think, the most amazing thing about Randolph-Macon—she said I want to tell you about the first time I lead a class lecture. She said I studied very hard, I went in, I did my lecture, and in 20 minutes it was over. So I started all over again and did another 20 minutes of the lecture. In other words, she wanted us to be comfortable and to be able to speak absolutely comfortably. And one of the most amazing things is that she said, “If you can afford to support artists in your own locale, do so,” which I’ve done, and I’ve loved it. I never go to an art gallery without thinking about Dr. Williams. How I would love to have had her talk about a painting: I like this, I don’t like it; she was never demeaning; she was always like, “I want to talk to you about what you like about it and what you don’t like about it,” cause that’s very valuable. Now, she was one of my best teachers.

There were so many other teachers, many who have very interesting, funny kind of scenarios—which I wouldn’t want to go into—but it’s really funny. I don’t know if you remember Dr. Curry. I took Shakespeare with Dr. Curry and he was one of these hysterical guys reading Shakespeare. He would laugh and we would all laugh too, and some of his English majors would make signs and they would say “LAUGH!” ... and he would also say, “Well I know you girls are going to UVA this weekend and you’re going to be in the library all day studying all this stuff” – but you don’t do that.

Anyway, but I think there are probably liberal arts colleges around the country that have beautiful facilities, wonderful faculty, students, etc. but I don’t think they have what, to me, exemplifies Randolph-Macon. And it’s very hard to really describe; and that is: the spirit. Now there’s a spirit which is: Rara and honey bee, I was Rara, Evil Bee world of the century. I think that’s very important but this is a quality that is so profound, and I think, if you are a Randolph-Macon alum, you know exactly what I’m talking about. It is a spirit that purveys every single alum, every person that was here in this school. And that is probably something that has been with me all my life and it will remain with me all my life.

I like to say, this school is in my bones... but let me tell you what, it is also in my heart 100%. I’m sort of a perpetual student. I’ve been taking classes here and there and the odd, all because of what this school stands for. For me it was to continue education, not just as something you would *do*, but something that means something profoundly, deeply to you and also to express that learning to other people, which I’ve also done in the zoo and all that.

Let me tell you what, this place is on my heart now, and forever. Thank you, thank you.

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### *Introduction of Rie Meriwether Godsey*

An economics major first intent on a career in banking, **Rie Meriwether Godsey '77** applied her love of serving others and her entrepreneurial talent to found her own company, Meriwether Godsey, in 1985 with her husband Eddie.

Launching her own unique concept of residential dining seemed a natural outcome from the path Rie had taken at R-MWC and after. Rie started in the R-MWC dining hall as a waitress and quickly became a head waitress. With her leadership skills, she recruited a number of classmates to the coveted position of “waitron.” She served on the Skeller Board, a student-run snack bar. After graduation, Rie started small—first a catering company in 1980, then two residential dining accounts in Lynchburg. Her first account was providing the food service to R-MWC, where she bid and won the contract away from an established vendor. This paved the way for a contract with Virginia Episcopal School. In the late '90s Meriwether Godsey added restaurants. In 2007, with the acquisition of Lynchburg’s Farm Basket market, the company added a retail outlet for home accessories and food and garden items.

Rie’s philosophy on food service has differentiated her company significantly from others in the industry, so that it now services 30 locations in Virginia, the District of Columbia, Maryland, North Carolina, and Pennsylvania with creative, wholesome menus, often including locally-grown and seasonal foods.

Rie’s company employs over 500 people whom she motivates to excel with an equal measure of trust and recognition. Many of the R-MWC students that Rie recruited for the catering business are owner-managers of Meriwether Godsey: Becky Dawson Tweedy '81, Marta Ruggles '82, Celia Lloyd '83, and Sara Thompson '83. Rie and Eddie’s niece, Schuyler Godsey Somers '08, is also part of the home office team.

Kathy Seifert Graves '80, Rie’s good friend in college, nicknamed her “the mean old cafeteria lady.” But her employees and peers would not agree. Rie is known for her collaborative management style—engaging her chefs, managers, and service staff in the core principles of her company. Rather than isolating herself in company headquarters, Rie prefers to work in the field, visiting accounts with her team and encouraging them to share their trials and triumphs.

Rie serves on the Virginia Foundation of Independent Colleges’ Board of Trustees and on the Advisory Board of Suntrust Bank, as well as on the advisory board for the Jubilee Center, James River Day School, and Employee Assistance of Central Virginia.

Skip, Muriel, Dr. Quillian, I understand that you soon recognized Rie’s potential as a business person while she was at R-MWC. Your support of Rie as a student leader and as a budding business owner is a vital thread of her story. Economics Professor Carl Stern was Rie’s student advisor and mentor. He could not be here tonight since he is still in Maine. He sends his love. As our professors continue to do today, Carl Stern instilled in Rie the practice of critical thinking and a deep level of engagement. Those lessons are still vivid for Rie to this day.

We honor you, Rie, for your entrepreneurship and your vision.

*Remarks from Rie Meriwether Godsey '77*

I am both honored and humbled by this award. There really have been two primary influences that have shaped my personal story.

**#1 Family**

I am the youngest of four—two sisters and an older brother—who were incredible role models and whom I idolized growing up. Our parents were interesting, hard working, intellectuals who lived simply and chose educating their children over acquiring worldly possessions. All four of us had private educational opportunities, from boarding school through graduate school. Life growing up at the Meriwether's was sort of like a constant combination of summer camp and summer school; my mother was the neighborhood pied piper.

There was always a house full of books, an outside full of nature, and a community full of free cultural events. Continuous learning was a way a life. Mother, Mary Margaret, was an early feminist, the 1<sup>st</sup> female chemist hired by Dupont Corporation in 1939, where she worked for eight years before retiring to raise her four children. She and father Jim were loving, but taught us to be tough and resilient. We learned about “no whining” very early in our lives. The “if you have a sniffle, go out and get fresh air or, “if you have a problem, figure it out” - type lessons. They were always there to support but not to fix it.

**# 2 Major Influence in my life: this college**

Several people influenced my decision to attend but most prominently was my sister-in law Diane, who graduated in 1971, 2 years before I started. R-MWC is not just my alma mater. I spent 21 years intimately involved on this campus. Four years as a student and 17 years of my working life Being a college student anywhere in the early '70s was an interesting experience to say the least. I believe 1973–1977 may have been some of the most dynamic years in the history of R-MWC. My classmates and our upper class women were “raring to go.” They were bright, curious, feisty, and fun. I would describe the faculty and administration similarly; they were a “brilliant lot”—the best of the best.

There were still elements of unrest and rebelliousness during our years, but not in a negative way. There was constant critical thinking and challenging discussions were taking place both in and outside of the classroom. We were encouraged to think globally and outside the box. Along with being one of the first classes not to have to dress for Sunday lunch, opting instead for holey blue jeans and bandannas on our heads, we may have also been the first decade of women inclined to think more about careers and less about marriage right after graduation.

R-MWC is also where I launched my career, unplanned though it was. I majored in economics, planned to go into banking, then on to get my MBA. The recession of 1977 caused a detour and my interim “stop over” job became my life's passion—from student waitress, to head waitress, to dining hall manager, to director of dining services, to an entrepreneur starting a new company at 29 years of age. All that happened on this campus with the support of so many—administrators, faculty, co-workers, family, and friends.

Dr. Stern was initially not at all happy about my “interim job” in food service.

But he changed his tune as the years went by and proudly claimed his student a success. A real joy was seeing the Sterns and Quillians celebrating their anniversaries together for many years at our first restaurant, Meriwether's, where Dr. Stern delighted in telling "our story" to the servers and other guests.

R-MWC took a chance on two young entrepreneurs, Rie and Eddie Godsey, allowing us to start our business on their turf and becoming our first business partners. We "worked our fingers to the bone", quoting one of our colleagues, to assure success. And by many measures, we achieved success including being listed in the top 5 college dining services in the country by the Princeton Review during our tenure. R-MWC was also the place that I learned my first and hardest business lesson. Dealing with the adversity of losing our contract with the college in 1995 was really, really, really tough on so many levels. However, dealing with this adversity was definitely the catalyst that led us to "get over it and figure it out," as my mother would say, and go on to diversify and grow our business.

Many of "The Us" I refer to are in this room and I would like you all to know that I share my honor with you. Starting with my life and business partner, husband Eddie, who along with brother Jay, really convinced me that "we can do this!" And we did, working side-by-side in the trenches for many years, building the business together. But we were not alone some other incredible people are equally responsible for making the company the special place it is:

- A wonderful and diverse group of over 500 Meriwether Godsey team members, 60% of whom are women
- The seven members of our senior management team, four of whom are R-MWC alums from the early '80s, all women, who like me, had not planned dining services as their careers, but who worked as student "waitrons" and jokingly referred to me, in the early years, as the "mean old cafeteria lady." Women who ended up loving Meriwether Godsey and getting the foodie bug—and are still with us after 20 plus years.
- Outside Meriwether Godsey there have been wonderful family and friends who have been our biggest fans and supporters. Family—mine, ours (children Taylor and Lela) and Eddie's, including father Roy who told us we were brilliant for choosing this business - saying, "the whole world wakes up hungry every morning!"
- Friends. A surprising coincidence... the majority of our close friends are R-MWC graduates who like me, found themselves settling in Lynchburg with their equally handsome, smart spouses.
- Another benefit of living in Lynchburg and working at the College was to establish even stronger relationships with the dynamic group of faculty and administrators that I referenced earlier. Some of this "old guard" are here tonight and I thank you as well, and all the other groups I have mentioned, for your friendship and years of support.

As I was told by a family friend, when he heard about my acceptance to the college, and whose wife had gone to R-MWC, He said, "Ah, R-MWC, Randolph College for 'Makin Women'!" I think he got it right!

My brother and I did not get advanced doctoral degrees, as our sisters, Marlee and Emily did. We choose instead to continue our education “on the job.” I am proud to say, my brother Jay received his distinguished alumnus award from his alma mater W & L, just a few years ago. Regardless of the paths the four of us chose, we are thankful for the gift of education and the love of learning our parents and professors instilled in us.

I will close with a few messages to students.

1. The business I chose is very rewarding in so many ways: it’s creative and fast paced; the tasting opportunities are yummy; we have had the honor of being involved in many people’s special days and occasions. We’ve served and met many dignitaries. But, it’s also a hard one, physically and mentally, with 3 deadlines a day called breakfast, lunch, and dinner, that can’t be put off until tomorrow. And after the glamour of an event, there are dishes to wash and floors to be scrubbed, often at ungodly times of the day and night.
2. An Asian immigrant, who was an engineer by trade but has run a successful restaurant in the U.S. for 20+ years said, “food service is not rocket science, it’s **harder** than rocket science.” Another recent article quoted a young entrepreneur, a lawyer turned caterer, who said she went from billing \$750 an hour to making \$1 per hour on her first event.

So what’s the point of all this?

The opening line of our company’s core values is “Love food, people, and serving others.” Point being, if you don’t love what you do, you will be miserable. Second point: be willing to tough out the learning years and experience overcoming adversity. Even as you are personally driven to succeed, also be sure to *care about other people*, and try to make a difference.

The Right Reverend Frank Vest, who of course has a College connection, wife Ann and daughter Nina, are both graduates, had a favorite blessing, a non-denominational variation of which is: “May a higher power bless you with enough foolishness to believe that you can make a difference in your community, in our world, and courageously try what you never imagined you could do.”

And lastly, borrowing from CEO of Apple Computers Steve Jobs’ commencement address to Stanford University: “Stay hungry, Stay foolish.” Cheers, and thank you!

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**Close of the presentation:**

It is a pleasure to recognize both of you, Dot and Rie, with our Alumnae Achievement Award. Congratulations and thank you again for the distinction you have brought to our College.

This is the conclusion of our program this evening. Thank you all for joining us.

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