

# *Small college charms its way into hearts of three generations*



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*“Like the tall trees that shaded the commencement ceremony, the Boulé family has roots on campus that run three generations deep.”*

There is a special place where I belong, where I will always belong. And now my daughter will always belong there, too.

My mother and father met and married in this place; they wrote research papers and crammed for tests and played too much bridge and jitterbugged to vinyl records of big band music in the student union building. My mother was a campus queen, the Sweetheart of Sigma Chi. My father was a budding entrepreneur who made a fortune delivering dry cleaning and bouquets of flowers and midnight snacks to girls in the dormitories. Mom played the piano. Dad read voraciously and played baseball. Together they were a fearsome debate team.

Dad attended Whitman College, he joked, because a friend told him there were a lot of beautiful women there. He'd grown up in Walla Walla; the G.I. Bill would pay his tuition. He enrolled. My mother arrived straight from high school in Seattle. She loved the place on sight.

I followed my parents to Whitman College 25 years later. After my teen years in a suburb of Los Angeles, arriving in Walla Walla felt like I was stepping into an episode of “Green Acres.” My clock radio awoke me the first morning of classes with, “And now, the hog report.”

But I knew I was in the right place. I'd tried to talk myself into attending a prestigious university, but I hated it on sight. Long hikes from class to class. Teeming classrooms. Dead grass.

In the outside world, the Vietnam War controversy raged. At Whitman we organized a peace march, we debated public policy. But on our rural island,

surrounded by fields of wheat and fresh asparagus and sweet onions, we felt protected — perhaps too protected — from the turmoil. While the rest of the world changed around us, we made plans to change the world when we returned to it.

I wrote about those changes in the college newspaper for which my dad had written. My friends and I lobbied for coed dorms. I wore my hair long and straight. I listened to sitar music, although I preferred Carole King.

My professors were excited about the Civil War and party politics and the stars in the sky. I agreed with them. I got a great education.

But I did not expect my daughter to choose Whitman College. It was too close to home. She was more interested in colleges in the East. She thought she might attend a music conservatory.

At each prospective college we visited during her senior year of high school, she sat in on classes in subjects that interested her: French literature, the classics, music theory. She took notes, not on the subject matter of the classes, but on the conduct of the professors and the students. At one school the students slept through class; at another they competed with and ridiculed one another. Professors were bored or pedantic or, briefly, interesting. But at Whitman, she said, “Everybody participated and the professors were fascinating. I was dying to come back the next day.”

So she ended up in Walla Walla for four years — well, except for time spent studying abroad — and, like her mother and her grandparents before her, it was a perfect fit.

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## *Boulé: Daughter sings operetta on same stage I did*

*Continued from inside front cover*

She sang French songs in a women's a cappella group. She had the lead in a Gilbert and Sullivan operetta on the same stage where I once had the lead in a Gilbert and Sullivan operetta. Like her mother and her grandparents before her, she ate hamburgers and drank root beer milkshakes from the Iceburg Drive-In. She got excited about geology. She got excited about women composers and book-binding and constitutional law.

Whitman College has changed in three generations. My daughter took fewer required courses than her grandparents, and more than I took in the laid-back 1970s. The college has grown from 800 to more than 1,300 students. Those students are smarter and harder-working than ever. It's more difficult to be admitted to Whitman now; I wonder if my parents and I would be accepted today.

But it's too late to give us that bad news now. Like the tall trees that shaded the commencement ceremony, the Boulé family has roots on campus that run three generations deep. And our love for that small place just continues to grow. My niece will be a sophomore at Whitman next year. Already she feels the same.

Our family has staked a small claim on that place, and the college has staked a claim in our lives. In a country short on tradition, I am amazed to be part of a 60-year-old bit of continuity.

A friend in France once said his parents were upset when he chose not to enter the family jewelry store business. His family has owned the store for 400 years.

Here in the Western part of the new world, the children of immigrants and pioneers, at least the Boulé family is making a start of a tradition.

Two weeks ago I sat on a folding chair in front of Memorial Building on the Whitman campus and heard Arthur Schlesinger Jr. tell a sea of graduates they are the future. Someone once said those words to me, I thought. And before me, to my parents. If my daughter is now the future, what does that make me? What does it make my parents?

Most of those who turned their tassels that day will find jobs or attend graduate schools in cities far from Walla Walla; my daughter will study for a master's degree at an opera training program at Rice University in Texas. Nobody will ever call Houston an oasis. Nobody will ever call it isolated.

As I watched the commencement pomp and circumstance I thought by tomorrow these Whitman graduates will be dispersed to the wide world. Some may never again spend four years in a quiet town. They will skim over the surface of the planet in airplanes and stay in touch with one another by computers and cell phones. They are now citizens of the world. But they'll always share a home in one small place.

At the end of the ceremony my daughter stood before her graduating class, diploma in hand, and led the commencement crowd in the singing of the college anthem. My parents and I still remember the words. Decades apart, we sang on the same stages, studied in the same library, heard the same tower bell chime. We acquired our sense of place the way people learn languages best — through total immersion. We will never forget the words.



*Margie Boulé, '73, right, and her daughter, Alexandra Boulé-Buckley, '03, left, presented songs from Broadway shows at the Baccalaureate program in Cordiner Hall.*