

The Pages of Time

Alumni retell history

In the late 1960s and early '70s, college students didn't have the luxury of shooting a quick text to mom and dad with an update about life at school. Instead, they relied heavily on letters. Last year, three alumni of Whitman College collaborated with the Washington institution's alumni office to produce the Whitman College Letter Project, which seeks to bring an authentic student voice to the history of a turbulent era.

Inspired by a retired professor's presentation about 1960s Whitman history at their 40th class reunion in 2011, David Current, Cleve Larson, and Barbara Morrison James devised a means to tell a complementary history from the student perspective.

Working with Nancy Mitchell, associate director of alumni relations, the trio asked fellow alumni to dig through their attics to find letters they'd written during their Whitman

years that they or their parents may have kept. Within months, they received 80 letters from 20 alumni. They read, transcribed, and edited the collection into a series and contacted the Whitman theater department about students possibly performing a dramatic reading at the Class of 1972's 40th reunion. Seven students jumped at the opportunity.

"They were fascinated by the letters. They didn't understand that, [back] then, you couldn't just call home.

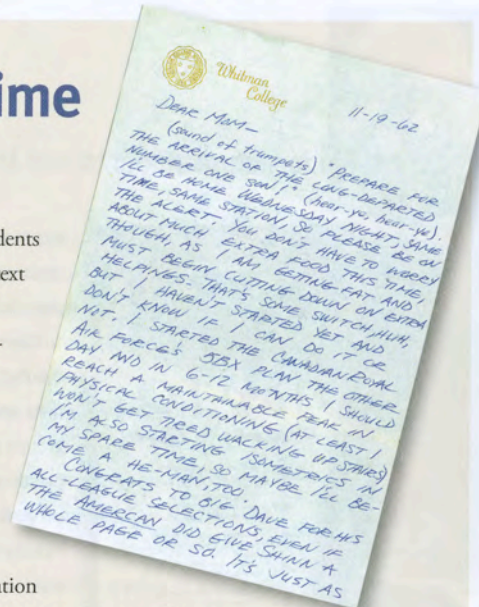
You didn't have email," Current says. "The writers talked plainly about the issues of the day," including the Vietnam War, the civil and women's rights movements, and everyday life.

The letter-reading performance drew a standing room-only audience and deeply affected the students and alumni in attendance.

"The Class of 1972 invited us to their reunion dinner and gave us a round of applause," Current says. "To see [today's students] reading our words brought us closer to the reality of the experience than if we had done it ourselves."

A video of the performance and images of the letters, photographs, and more are available at www.whitmanletterproject.com. Mitchell is working with other alumni groups on similar projects to help students understand the experiences of those who came before them and whose legacies they carry on as Whitman students.

"There's a responsibility for them to document their life and their impact on campus so that future generations will know about those who have gone before them," Mitchell says.—Kristin Simonetti



WHITMAN COLLEGE/GREG LEHMAN

TEAM EFFORT: 1971 Whitman alumni Cleve Larson, Barbara Morrison James, and David Current spearheaded the letters project.