

The Vintage Voice

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How I Lost My Mind and Put on a 50th Reunion

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In early 2004, I began to eagerly anticipate my 50th high school reunion, but as spring progressed, no information came my way about plans for such an event. I remembered that our class president had died in an automobile accident some years ago. Surely someone else would take up the reins and organize a reunion for the 1954 graduating class of Charleston High School. If not, at least I could go to the CHS alumni reunion for all classes.

June came and we arrived in fine fettle on a quite warm day for the picnic lunch held at a park on the outskirts of Charleston. I began to see folks I knew. Most of them were from other classes. Only six of my classmates had come on our 50th reunion year!

Without thinking very hard about it, I asked one of the six if he knew how we could get a list of our fellow classmates. He happened to have a 30-year-old copy of a list that had been used for a 20th reunion. I closed in on him before he had time to blink. Would he be willing to work on that list and at least update the people on it who lived in Charleston? While he was trying to think of a reason he could not do that, I named several people who would be glad to help him (at least I hoped they would). He agreed to try.

By fall, he had gotten a good many updates, had learned that a few people had died, couldn't find addresses or married names for some of the women, and declared that he had done his part. And he meant it. I think the phrase he used was, "I need to get back to my life." I had been busy, too, and had asked several members of our Senior Board to help me put on a belated 50th reunion in June 2005. As long as I handled the mailings, the bookkeeping, and acted as master of ceremonies, they were glad to help.

In November, the first mailings went out. On the strength of the number of responses and positive replies, we proceeded. In January, I sent another letter to 70 classmates, with only one returned "person unknown." I was elated!

I worked on this project almost every day, on the telephone, or via the computer, or hand-writing letters; sometimes all three. It got to be an obsession. In the middle of dinner, a call would come demanding to know who was coming: "Is my best friend going to be there?" I was selling the event just like real estate. I got to be a smooth talker. I listened to stories of divorce, job loss, ecstatic success, death, dementia, stroke, travels abroad, many careers, all conditions of man. Was this what I had bargained for? No, but it was worth every minute.

By this time, the committee people who lived in Charleston had found a place to hold a dinner on Friday night and a cocktail party on Saturday, engaged a caterer, and arranged for flowers and decorations. We even had nametags with our pictures from our senior annual. How else would we recognize each other? One thing we did not do well was estimate expenses. Always count on it costing more than you think it will.

Affirmative replies to the second letter kept coming in. We still had no addresses for about 23 people, and 24 were dead. But people were coming from Annapolis, Seattle, Arizona, Florida, and California – it was wonderful. The puzzling thing to me was that some of the people from Charleston, the ones who already lived there, did not want to come, and wrote and told me so. I still do not understand that, but I did something really tricky.

I asked everyone to send me his or her correct name, spouse's name, address, phone number, email address, and *a short biography*. It took lots of editing, but it was fascinating to read what people had done. My small class had graduates who had lived all over the world, headed companies, and made significant contributions to many communities. One man who never even whistled when he was in high school was singing in operatic choruses. Another had helped found a college. One had worked with the CIA. A boy who graduated at age 16 had gone on to become a man who had both a Ph.D. and an MD, had discovered a substitute for plasma, and had been a pioneer in establishing intensive care units in major hospitals around the country. The major occupation among the men was engineer. There were no clergy. I married a priest, and that was as close as we had gotten. Most of the women had raised their families before entering the workforce full-time, our era just preceding “women’s lib.” Their main occupations were nursing and secretarial.

One of the interesting things that happened was that I made new friends through the Internet with people who had been in my class but with whom I had not been close. I still correspond with a woman in California several times a week through emails, and I am wondering why I never realized how much fun she was, 50 years ago.

As the time for the reunion drew near, my husband began to think he might just go for the Friday night dinner and leave the next day for a preaching engagement. I reminded him of the times I had gone with him to things I did not particularly want to attend. Then I pulled out all stops and told him I needed him to go so that I could show off my “Trophy Husband.” He changed his plans and went to the whole thing.

Personalities don't change much, and those who were sweet were still sweet, those who liked to brag still did, and those who were nerds were still nerds – which did not mean that they had not been successful. Some of the ones who did not want to attend later wrote and asked for a copy of the booklet with class information. I had to smile.

It was a wonderful experience to pull all this together and to see the people who shared a time that was important in the shaping of all of us. I think of them from time to time, and I am proud of them. I would not trade anything in the world for having gotten them together, but my husband has *instructions, not just permission*, to shoot me if I ever try something like that again.



Nancy Rice Duvall lives in Columbia, SC, with retired husband, the Rt. Rev. Charles Duvall, dozens of daylilies, and many new friends. She is a vestry person at St. John's Episcopal Church. Fortunately, her husband shares her sense of humor.