



Entering a Women's College Two Years Early

by Michele J. Cargain

Continued from page 21

Speech delivered at the Conference on Adolescence, Acceleration, and National Excellence at Simon's Rock College of Bard College, Great Barrington, MA, June 19, 1994.

After finishing a rather unusual educational path, I would like to share some observations of my examined life.

I've just graduated *magna cum laude* and Phi Beta Kappa from Mary Baldwin College, a small liberal arts college in Virginia. I majored in biology, and as part of the graduation requirement designed an original research project. For this work, I was awarded distinction in my department. A paper I co-authored with an advisor at UVA has just been accepted for publication in *Ecological Entomology*. I've just turned 20.

I had an exceptionally happy and stable childhood. My parents provided me with much encouragement, support, and independence. They encouraged a variety of activities including music, dancing (I began lessons at age four), art, and just about anything else I was interested in at the time. I attended a small elementary school of only 16 students. Individual attention from teachers allowed me to work on special projects, either alone or with a few others, during recess or in lieu of standard classroom activities. Projects included advanced reading, math, and computer programming.

I took a special interest in computers and subsequently was enrolled in a summer course in programming at a

community college. I had just finished third grade, and the other students were in high school. I wrote a program in which a face appeared on the screen and the caption was composed of questions for the face to answer; the face then "replied." I enjoyed class, and the age difference did not bother me. Strange glances were cast in my direction on the first few days of class, but I suppose the students just got used to me.

At this time, my aptitude for art was recognized. A poster I drew in the first grade won first prize in the school district. My work continued to be judged, and I often won money and ribbons. Later, especially in high school, I would spend many hours sketching, painting, and watercoloring, hinting that I would continue to pursue studio art in college.

After the fourth grade, the students were transferred to a larger school for grades five through eight. There, I was placed in all of the accelerated programs (reading, math, art, and science). The classes thinned out; by eighth grade we had a core of 10 accelerates. The classes (especially the science laboratories) bonded us. We knew each others' strengths and weaknesses and were accustomed to friendly competition. I made some of my best friends in these courses.

In high school, we were placed in honors classes and accelerated by one year. I especially enjoyed my art and biology classes. I made friends with upperclassmen, and many of my junior friends were taking the SATs. So I took them, too. I was grossly unprepared, not even knowing the scoring rules.

However, I was bombarded with mailings from colleges and universities, including NYU and Brown. Among the catalogs and brochures, I received information about the Program for the Exceptionally Gifted (PEG) at Mary Baldwin College. This was surprising to me, as I never had considered myself "gifted." I have always been a perfectionist and had risen to the top of the class. I believed that everyone had a "gift" and that perhaps mine was a talent for academic endeavors. I still believe that, although I think my accomplishments have been the result of motivation and perseverance as much as anything else.

At that time, I was in the 10th grade (ranked 2nd) and attending a public high school of about 500 students, most of whom I had been with since fifth grade or earlier. I was involved in many extra-curricular activities, including orchestra, chamber music ensembles, dance classes, leadership roles, and advanced art classes. Although I remained in accelerated classes, I felt that I was not being challenged enough, so my decision to come to PEG was not difficult in that respect. I was uncomfortable with the idea of leaving my family and friends for a school 10 hours away I'd never heard of. I also feared I would be friendless, since my closest friends were male. Where would I find good friendships at a women's college?

I entered the program after 10th grade. I was a junior transfer and lived under the PEG rules for only one year before entering the campus at large. Rules included signing in and out of the dorm, restrictions to campus, and

weekly meetings with the resident director. My first year, like the average college student's freshman year, was a time of transition and adjusting to change. My fears of being friendless were not validated; I made many strong friendships. It was wonderful and refreshing to be surrounded by other students who shared in common academic experiences.

Like other freshmen, I wondered and worried about choosing a major. I had always been involved in a variety of areas and excelled almost equally in all that I pursued. I will admit to entertaining thoughts of transferring to Yale after my first semester. This notion was largely based on my feelings toward the overall quality of Mary Baldwin students — “the traditionals.” After my first semester, I was drawing parallels between the students at MBC and those I had left behind in high school, in that I was able to attain a high GPA with less work and studying than I had anticipated. I began to worry that once I graduated from Mary Baldwin and entered the real world, I would no longer be able to compete with and surpass my peers.

I had taken a range of classes that semester: art, biology, composition, dance, and Spanish. My art class was unremarkable. I realized that I could gain all I wanted through my own work and exploration. My biology class, however, was particularly challenging and interested me. It was team-taught by two amazing professors, Eric Jones and Lundy Pentz (and these two, in particular, were my mentors throughout my college career). It was their knowledge, enthusiasm, and interest in their students that impressed me. The laboratory, especially, was challenging. I realized that I had found my place in the college, at least academically. My excitement in discovering the biology department, as well as knowing upperclassmen and admiring their work, encour-

aged me to stay: to establish myself and to finish my education at Mary Baldwin.

During my sophomore year, I accepted an internship to do ecological research with the University of Virginia at the Blandy Experimental Farm. The internship was funded by the National Science Foundation. I worked with five other students, all from UVA. We were given the opportunity to design our own research projects with the approval of our chosen advisors. I worked with Edward F. Connor and designed a project to investigate the foraging patterns of a parasitoid of a leaf-mining insect. In that brief 10-week period I learned how to design a project, analyze the data, write, and present a scientific paper. Most importantly, I learned that I could compete successfully with my peers. Over the next two years, I worked on the paper with Dr. Connor. It has been accepted for publication.

With a great sense of accomplishment, I returned to school for my third year. I became more involved with campus activities and immersed myself even further in my studies. I earned an internship with DuPont and a scholarship from my department to support my living expenses during that time. I was working in the environmental biotechnology department, focusing largely on bioremediation of chlorinated solvents. Once again, this experience confirmed that my education was not inferior to that gained at other institutions.

I spent most of my senior year in the lab, trying to juggle the presidency of Beta Beta Beta (the biology honor society), co-chairing the Student Activities Board, Student Senate, and various faculty/student committees and with work on my thesis. My vision didn't seem to extend much further than the completion of my thesis and the dreaded defense. It's true that all

things work out in the end, it seems. I made it through and earned “distinction” in addition to the John Mehner award, which is given periodically to a graduating senior because of her thesis, high departmental and overall GPA, and general accomplishments.

I have been asked to address my negative and positive experiences relating to my education. As I thought about these four years, I can honestly say that I have no complaints relating to my experience as a PEG. I had no problem being two years accelerated, or being a Northeasterner.

I have gained many things from PEG: some more quantifiable than others. I met an incredible set of people at and through PEG. The opportunity to interact with students having similar experiences was very special. I am certain that I will never again meet such a wonderful and diverse group.

Before coming to PEG, I was told by many people I would later regret important things that I would miss, such as the prom, high school graduation, and two great years of one's life. I believe that high school gave me the opportunity to grow socially, but not much else. I never really missed high school, but I did miss my family and friends. I believe that feeling is largely independent of age. Instead of missing high school experiences, I feel that I've gained two years to explore various fields of research before embarking on a new path, graduate school.

The avenue I chose is certainly not the correct path for everyone. Many factors need to be taken into consideration: maturity level and the desire to accelerate, among others. Each person must find and, in some cases, forge his or her own trail. In response to my most frequently asked question, “If you had the chance, would you do it all over again?” the answer would be a resounding “Yes.” ☺