

Photos courtesy of Greta Carter Blanton



# Sharing Life's Lessons *One Letter at a Time*

Bound together  
by a 60-year  
round-robin  
correspondence,  
10 OU alumnae  
have redefined  
enduring  
friendship.

BY ANNE BARAJAS ■ Only five months after the death of her husband in October of last year, Lillian Handley suffered a massive heart attack. Before being whisked away for life-saving open heart surgery, Lillian gave her daughter an urgent set of marching orders: Keep the round robin going.

Lillian is one of “the Robins,” 10 remarkable OU alumnae whose unbroken circle of friendship began in the shadow of World War II and has lasted throughout six decades of joys, sorrows and shared experiences.

Sixty years ago, in 1940, the Robins were young women from very different worlds who all received a special tap on the shoulder.

The tap came from outgoing senior members of Mortar Board, the national honor society that selects students at the end of their junior year on the basis of scholarship, leadership and service. In the '40s, Mortar Board was restricted to outstanding female students. One spring day, classroom doors across OU's Norman campus opened, and young women in caps and gowns filed in to anoint their successors. No one knew who

was to be tapped until the moment her shoulder was touched and a tassel pin was attached to her blouse.

Twelve young women were chosen: Elizabeth Almquist, Lillian Tarlton, Vera May Scheig, Betty Bailey, Katie Clark, Doris Jo Morrisette, Helen Slesnick, Joy Turner, Greta Carter, Alice Dodge, Eleanor Champlin and Helen McClurg.

The 12 met weekly with the Dean of Women, sponsored lectures and fireside forums and raised funds for the student infirmary and women's scholarships. By the end of their senior year, the former strangers had become close friends. They gathered to say goodbye with a last cup of coffee at Oklahoma Memorial Union's cafeteria on graduation morning 1942.

"Everyone was sort of crying, and I suggested that we start a round robin letter," says retired Associated Press features writer Joy Turner Stilley, of Glen Oaks, New York. She explained that each of them would be responsible for adding a new letter to an ever-circulating packet twice a year. All agreed.

But the upheaval of World War II took its toll. Most of the Mortar Board members were in transit, following husbands who were involved in the war effort. Lives were unsettled.

"As soon as we were away from school, we were scattered. There were two tries that didn't work," remembers Betty Bailey Hall, who lives in Austin, Texas. Shortly after the war ended, Betty sent a postcard to the 11 other Mortar Board women to ask if they wanted to try once more. Ten postcards came back, and the round robin took wing.

On any given month during the past 60 years, the round robin has been circulating somewhere in the United States, en route to the waiting hands of an anxious reader. More than 1,200 letters have spanned six decades and the lifetimes of 10 Robins and their spouses, 26 children and dozens of grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

"When the round robin comes, everything stops," Bettysays. "Whenever you go back home, you're a daughter again. When you get that letter, you're a college student."

"You're just delighted. You put everything else down," agrees Doris Jo Morrisette Howard of Scottsdale, Arizona. Husbands and children quickly learned that the round robin's arrival was an occasion not to be interrupted.

The early letters caught the women up on the years between graduation and the post-war boom. The Robins discovered they were sharing many experiences, though they often were thousands of miles apart.

"There was so much to talk about and think about—husbands going over and coming back from war, children being born," says Doris Jo, whose late husband, the former OU

professor Lynn Howard, left for Japan shortly after the birth of their first child. He returned home safely, as did the eight other Robin spouses who went to war.

The Robins also were sharing news from the work front. Katie Clark Sponenberg was named IBM's first female sales representative in New York. And Joy, the new city editor at the *Shawnee Morning News*, became Oklahoma's first woman sports editor and the focus of much attention after most of the paper's staff went into the service. "I had never been to a football game in my life," she admits.

Five years after graduation, several of the Robins reunited. There have been six other official Robin reunions during the past half-century, amidst more casual gatherings as opportunities arose. The last reunion was in June, when six of the women met on the OU campus for the first time in 40 years. They toured the University and were overwhelmed by the changes in their little college town. Next year, they hope to meet on Joy's home territory in New York.

Family members are sure to be part of the 2003 reunion, as they have been from the beginning. The Robins have been such



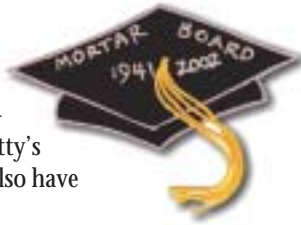
OPPOSITE: 1941-42 Mortar Board: (from left, front) Alice Dodge, Lillian Tarlton, Joy Turner, Katherine Clark, Greta Carter; (back) Eleanor Champlin, Helen Slesnick, Helen McClurg, Betty Bailey, Doris Jo Morrisette, Vera Mae Scheig; not pictured, Elizabeth Almquist. ABOVE: Thirty years later, in June 1972, the 10 "Robins" gathered in Houston: (from left) Doris Jo Howard, Joy Stilley, Betty Hall, Elizabeth Tuthill, Katie Sponenberg, Alice Wallace, Lillian Handley, Vera Mae Shirley, Helen Slesnick Wolk and Greta Blanton.

a constant presence in one another's lives that spouses and offspring have become one big, "unofficial family" now in its fourth generation, says Greta Carter Blanton, of El Reno.

That family has celebrated many accomplishments. The Robins cheer on husbands and children (many of whom also are OU alumni) with careers running the gamut from journalist to engineer, attorney, geologist, NASA scientist, homebuilder,

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teacher, doctor, computer system analyst and screenwriter. Other victories—such as the safe return of Betty’s two sons from the Vietnam War—also have been shared and savored together.



And the Robins are quick to point out each other’s personal achievements, as well. Six were Phi Beta Kappas, the rest members of other national honor societies. Two earned master’s degrees. The Robins took special enjoyment in Doris Jo’s travels around the globe and Joy’s 20-year career with the AP, where she landed interviews with noted authors—including Dr. Benjamin Spock—and such film stars as Ray Milland and Maurice Chevalier.

Now in their early 80s, most of the Robins set an enviable pace. Their calendars are full with family, travel, activities and the same volunteer service they learned as OU students. Helen Slesnick Wolk has served on the National Council of Jewish Women. Katie volunteers for the Red Cross in New Braunfels, Texas, Alice Dodge Wallace for the Denver Art Museum. Vera May Scheig Shirley, who now lives in Austin, works for non-violence and peace through her church.

“They picked rather well when they picked that group, because everyone has had exceptional and interesting lives,” Joy says proudly of her fellow Mortar Board members.

“I brag about my friends in that group,” Greta confesses. “I just really relish their adventures and experiences. They’ve all lived admirable lives.”

The Robins also have shared sorrows, including the death of children, beloved spouses of more than 50 years, and one of their own. In 1999, devoted mother and homemaker Elizabeth Almquist Tuthill became “the first break in our flight path,” as Betty wrote.

But through it all, the Robins feel they have prevailed. And weathering the highs and lows together has made the journey all the more meaningful.

“We’ve lived pretty parallel lives,” Doris Jo says. “We’ve watched each other’s children grow up and all the triumphs and problems, which has kept us quite close. We’re just so much alike.”

“We didn’t dream that it was going to go on this long. It’s just wonderful,” Vera May adds.

The Robins say their long friendship has much to do with coming from a distinct time, place and experience that shaped their lives and the world’s history.

“You could take anyone and stick them together for 60 years, and they’d be cohesive,” Joy jokes. “I think we knew so much about each other’s lives that we wanted to read the next chapter.”

“I would say that there’s a microcosm of life in every letter. We have shared everything that life offers,” says Helen, who now lives in Edina, Minnesota.

Betty feels the secret to their successful friendship can be



Six Mortar Boarders returned to the campus for their 60th reunion in June 2002, three with their husbands: (front) Lillian Handley, Doris Jo Howard, Helen Wolk; (middle) Betty Hall, Greta Blanton, Alice Wallace; (back) Bill Blanton, Leo Wolk, Adin Hall.

revealed in one simple word: respect.

That respect began in Mortar Board, where equality was rooted in academic achievement and service. “It wasn’t based on competition or comparing one’s wealth or possessions,” she says. “For many years, we didn’t know that two of the girls didn’t have the money to buy their textbooks—they had to go the library to study.”

In fact, the Robins did not know each other’s birth dates until recent years. “We didn’t know who was the oldest or the youngest,” Betty says with a laugh.

But what they always have known is how precious and rare their relationship is.

“I think it’s remarkable that they’re still there and available and that it really did happen. It’s one of the few permanent relationships that I’ve had. I know I could depend on them if I needed someone to talk to,” says Lillian, who lives in Brenham, Texas. With the help of her daughter and son-in-law, she came to the June reunion only three months after her open-heart surgery.

“They are the only friends I have left from that age,” she adds frankly. On the day that doctors fought to save her life, Lillian said the round robin was very much in her thoughts. Whether or not she survived, the important thing was that the round robin kept moving on its six-decade journey through nine exceptional women’s lives.

“I told my daughter, ‘I have the robin, and it’s up to you to put a note in it and send it on.’” She paused. “That’s how much it has meant.”