



KAREN MIHM GRADUATED IN MAY OF 1967 from what was then the Carnegie Institute of Technology. She would go on to Case Western Reserve University, obtain a Masters in Speech Pathology, work as a freelance writer and a Speech-Language Pathologist, interview Dorothy Fuldheim for *New Woman* magazine, write a career booklet for *Careers in the Arts and Humanities*, and eventually retire. Now, she lives in Washington D.C. with her husband, takes part in political events, and enjoys spending time with her daughter. But through the years and through the changes and through life itself, what have remained constant are the connections she made at Carnegie Tech.

My Carnegie Mellon, Her Carnegie Tech

By N. Saidikowski



Karen Mihm

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BOTTOM RIGHT: PHOTO COURTESY OF KAREN MIHM CHANDLER.

ARTSY-LOOKING STUDENTS in fringed jackets and jeans, “boho” painting and design majors hauling fishing tackle boxes full of art supplies, an engineer clutching his slide-rule, young women in skirt-and-sweater sets with knee-socks and penny loafers. Divided by look, yet mixing comfortably amongst each other, they walk across the Cut on their way to class. Just another day at Carnegie Tech.

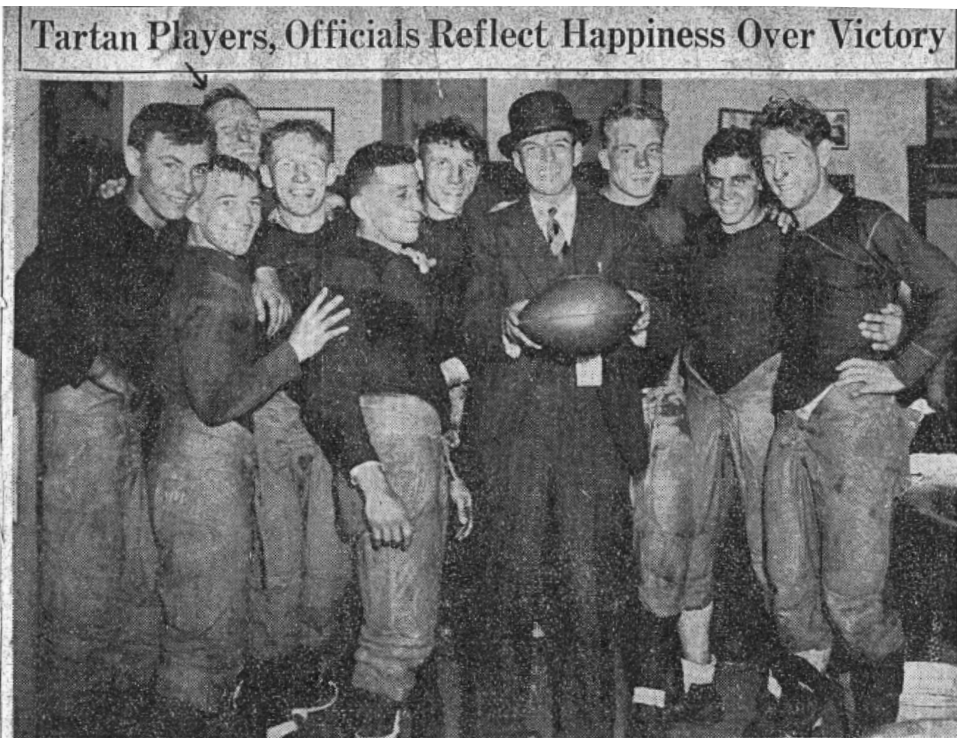
That look, the very distinct sections of the student body mixed together, is what first drew Karen Mihm to the Carnegie Institute of Technology.

In 1963, Karen entered Margaret Morrison Carnegie

College to pursue a degree in English. Although it had always been understood that Karen would attend college, she chose her father’s alma mater, Carnegie Tech, because of her interest in writing and journalism, the school’s stellar reputation, and, of course, that look.

“I was sort of drawn to that. I’m not sure exactly why,” Karen tells me.

Big Joe Mihm, Karen’s father, attended Carnegie Tech from 1930 to 1934, likely on a football scholarship which enabled him to afford college during the Great Depression. He had a pretty big football career at Tech, playing fullback, halfback, and then quarterback during his four years there. In 1933, with Big Joe’s help, Tech played to victory over Notre Dame for the first time since the upset



Carnegie Mellon Tartans (Joe Mihm in far back on left) in locker room post Notre Dame victory. Photo courtesy of Karen Mihm Chandler.

in 1928, when “this little rag tag bunch from Pittsburgh beat the Four Horsemen of Notre Dame,” Karen laughs.

“It was an upset then, too,” Karen says of the 1933 victory. “I think Notre Dame changed their coach because of that defeat.”

I ask her if he was excited when he learned she would be attending Carnegie Tech.

“He was very low-key about it,” she tells me. Considering how my own father reacted when I told him the college I had gotten into, I should not be so surprised by her answer. “I think he couldn’t quite believe it,” she muses. She felt absolutely no pressure to attend Tech. In fact, she explains, “I think he was kind of shocked I wanted to go there.”

She’s Karen Mihm Chandler, now, and she lives in Washington D.C. with her husband. They have become politically active in their retirement, and they volunteered for the Obama campaign. Karen introduced Caroline Kennedy before a speech, utilizing the writing skills she learned

at Carnegie Mellon. I call her on a quiet Saturday before her daughter comes in for a visit.

Full disclosure: Karen is my second cousin. I’ve known her my whole life as Aunt Karen. She and her husband attended my high school graduation; thirty-seven years before that, they were two of only about ten people at my parents’ wedding. When Karen heard that I had been accepted to Carnegie Mellon, she became an active (and shall we say vocal?) participant in my decision.

I had no idea at the time just what an amazing piece of Carnegie’s history she had experienced.

It’s interesting. “When you’re a student in an institution, you’re observing, sometimes without even being aware, these big changes that impact how the university goes in the future,” Karen muses.

THE “MAGGIE MURPHS”

Today, Margaret Morrison Carnegie Hall is home to the Carnegie Mellon School of Design and also houses a



Karen Mihm (far right), her daughter (front right), the author (front left), her mother. Photo courtesy of Karen Mihm Chandler.

few offices and classrooms belonging to the School of Architecture. In the mid-sixties, while it technically housed the English Department, Margaret Morrison was the domain mostly of Home Economics majors.

Women first entered the halls of the Margaret Morrison Carnegie College School for Women in 1906. From its inception, the aim of the school was to prepare young women for careers and professions which could earn them a living. In 1912, the school had expanded the courses offered enough that women could earn bachelor’s degrees from the Carnegie Institute of Technology.

They were known as the Maggie Murphs. Current CMU students might recognize the name from the café in Hunt Library.

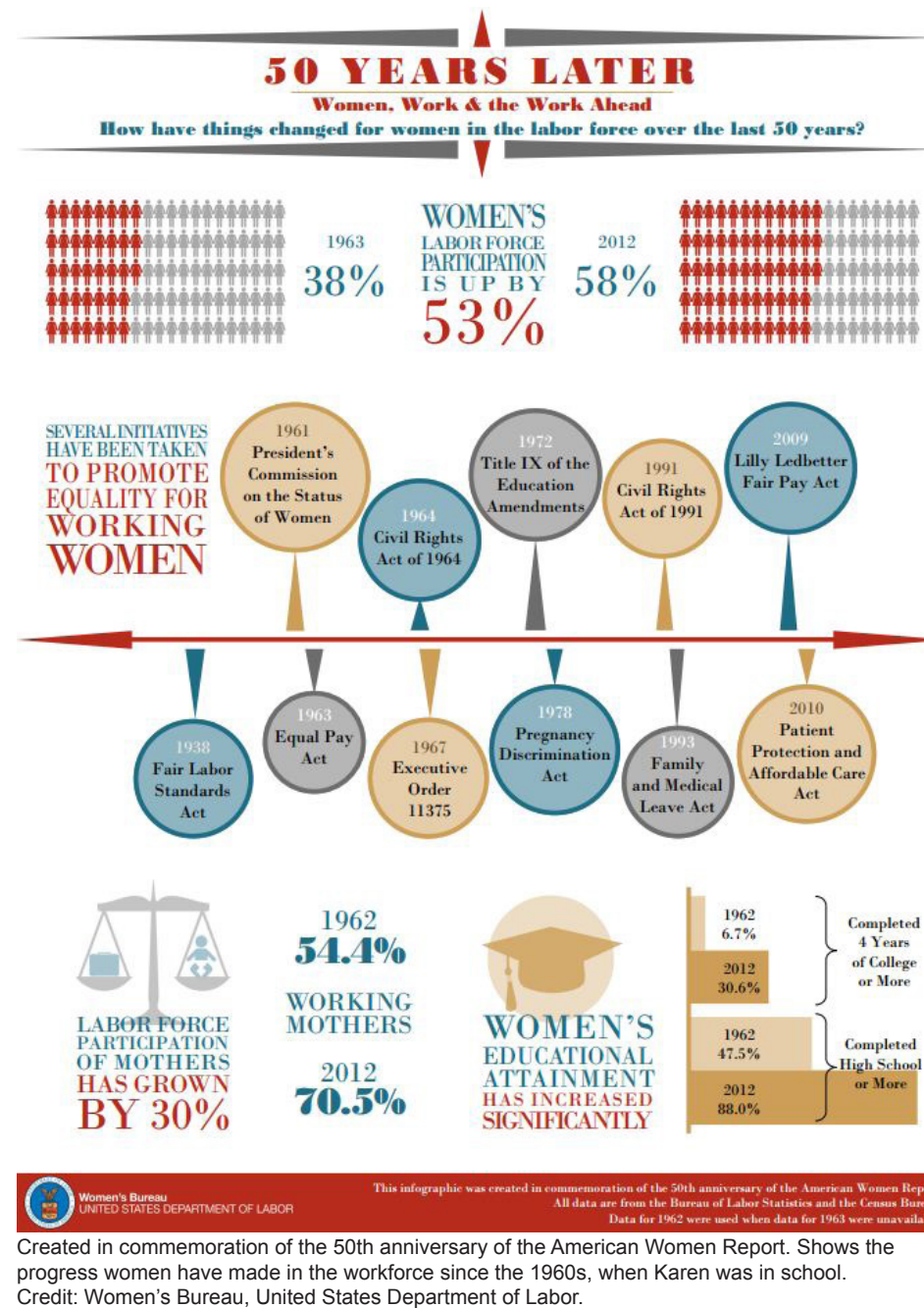
When Karen arrived in the sixties, most English classes were held in Baker hall, which today is the home of the Dietrich College and Carnegie Mellon’s English Department.

“That circular staircase up to the second floor and then the floor sloped down...” Karen recalls. “I was always told that the floors sloped that way because Andrew Carnegie said if it didn’t work out as a college, he would make it into a factory. I don’t know if that’s true or not...it could just be one of those myths that developed over time.” True or not, that myth has stuck around. I told a friend of mine about it, thinking it would make her laugh, but she was unimpressed – she had already heard the myth.

In addition to academic classes, the Maggie Murphs also took gym. “We learned fencing, folk dancing, a lot of field hockey...it was required.” Imagine fencing as a graduation requirement – how things have changed.

On the other hand, some things are exactly the same. Then, as now, the Carnegie institution was full of smart, ambitious, and wildly talented individuals.

“I was surrounded by these people who were very intelligent. I didn’t think that I was a dummy exactly, but



there was a lot of really high-powered talent there, as I’m sure there is, even more so, now.” I can certainly attest to that: Carnegie Mellon currently has some very talented people in the professional writing program. So talented, in fact, that I closely identify with Karen’s sentiment.

“The entire time that I was there, I felt that I was reaching up...reaching up,” Karen reflects. “I was aware that I was going to have to work hard, and just try to benefit as much as I could from not only the school, but just being around people who were very very talented in many different kinds of fields and just do the best that I can.”

Sometimes, “some engineer or math major would be

in our English classes, which was a bit unusual. And they were just as talented in literature and analysis of short stories as they were in their own major. It was a little irritating.” Because what non-major can walk into some high-level engineering or mathematics course and be at all talented?

“I think that’s great prep for life because you’re frequently surrounded by people who have more skills or more experience or are more driven than you.”

Still, I know I’ll be pretty annoyed if an engineer decides to crash one of my masters-level English classes.

CAMPUS LIFE

Because Karen’s parents lived in Pittsburgh, she considered living at home and commuting to and from school. Her parents, however, had other ideas. “Both of [them] were adamant that I should live on campus,” she explains. “He wanted me to have the kind of experience that he had,”



Big Joe Mihm

PHOTO COURTESY OF KAREN MIHM CHANDLER

Karen has to take a moment, as she chokes up a little at the memory. “And she said, ‘Honey, your dad was a football hero, everybody knew your dad.’”

she says of her father.

Big Joe had lived in Oakland, “literally a streetcar ride away from his college all the time, but he lived on campus.” A member of the Delta Tau Delta fraternity, he lived in the house for much of his time at college.

So when it came time for his daughter to attend college, he wanted her to do it right. “I lived there as if I was living in another city,” she reminisces. “I wasn’t running home every weekend, I wasn’t making phone calls home every day...it was like they sent me away to college.”

In the mid-sixties, the Maggie Murphs who lived on campus lived in Morewood Gardens. With no sorority houses on campus, young women from all affiliations lived together in the dorm. Bathrooms were

shared and each floor had a single phone. Residents signed in and out, housemothers kept an eye on everyone, the curfew was enforced, and no men were allowed on dorm floors. “If somebody’s father had to come up,” Karen says, “the cry went out, ‘Man on the floor!’”

Mornings were hectic. Because of the shared bathrooms, getting ready to go to classes was, as Karen succinctly put it, “a juggling act.” Fortunately, “you had an understanding with the other people who shared the bathroom what your schedule was.”

The women of Morewood apparently had all of their meals in the cafeteria there. Naturally, this begs the question: Was the dorm food edible? During the first part of Karen’s time at Tech, “the food was, you know, not great.” She explained, “You could have two small glasses of juice and two small glasses of milk, and you went through the cafeteria line....”

Then, things changed.

“My father and mother came over for a parents’ weekend or homecoming or something,” Karen recalls, “and we all ate in the Morewood cafeteria...in the fall, we all noticed that the food was great. We were all having steaks and as much milk as you wanted and as much juice as you wanted, and baked potatoes and sour cream. I said something to my mother about it, and she said, ‘Oh, after we came over there for homecoming, your father made some phone calls and they changed the food service because he was so appalled at the quality of the food.’ He was a rather active alum.” I can hear the smile in her voice.

She remembers a time when she and her husband re-

turned to the school for some homecoming event. “We were at a dinner, sitting at a big round table with a bunch of alums from many different years,” she recalls. “We’re all wearing nametags, of course, and this woman across the table from me said, ‘Karen Mihm...Karen Mihm? Are you related to Joe Mihm?’ And I said, ‘Oh, that’s my dad.’ She was an older lady, and I said, ‘Did you know my dad?’ And she said...” Karen has to take a moment, as she chokes up a little at the memory. “And she said, ‘Honey, your dad was a football hero, everybody knew your dad.’”

I suppose that when a 1930s football hero, especially one that helped Tech to victory over football powerhouse Notre Dame, calls up the school and requests that the food service in a dorm be improved, the food service tends to improve.

GREEK LIFE: KAPPA ALPHA THETA

Across the hall from Karen lived an upperclassman by the name of Marion Mulligan. Mulligan introduced Karen to Kappa Alpha Theta, one of the sororities on campus, and soon thereafter, Karen had decided she wanted to be a part of their community. “They were people who cared about their academic standing. I just felt comfortable with them, they were interesting people. They still are.” Always preparing for some big event, singing old sorority songs, practicing for skits at Spring Carnival, it seems like Mulligan and the rest of the Thetas never stayed still.

“For me, it was a foregone conclusion. I wanted to be part of Mulligan’s group.”

The women of this sorority bear no resemblance to the unfortunate stereotype of sorority girls perpetuated today. These women supported each other and looked out for one another, they worked hard and they went on to do great things. Karen’s sorority Big Sister, Marion Mulligan (who became Marion Mulligan Sutton) and her husband provided a grant to the English department in 2004 which funds the Marion Mulligan Sutton Award – a scholarship designed to provide support to undergraduate students during low- or unpaid summer internships in English or professional writing. Susan Witt, who, along with Judy Garwin, helped pull the Thetas through rehearsals for Greek Sing, sang with the San Francisco Opera. Judy managed to direct the Thetas to a win at Greek Sing one year. Rebecca Smith, who directed the

Theta’s Spring Carnival performances, appeared as a leading performer in musicals written by Steve Schwartz for Scotch ‘n Soda, one of which was Pippen Pippen.

That trend hasn’t changed. Karen and her husband visited Carnegie Mellon about five years ago, and they found the girls in Theta House to be quite amazing. “There was so much diversity, not just in ethnicity, but in their fields of study,” Karen comments. “There was a sprinkling of math and architecture women students back in the day. But that seems totally changed now. They were in all the fields, very ambitious. So impressive.”

Karen’s Rush experience was downright pleasant. “There were a series of parties held in small rooms over in Skibo. There was a lot of singing and just sitting in small groups, people talking to you.” This series culminated in Final Party, generally held in a fraternity house. Karen’s was to be held in Sigma Nu, but controversy surrounded this Final Party: President Kennedy had been shot and killed. “Did we go ahead with Final Party on the night that the president was shot?” Several young women apparently felt it would be disrespectful to do so and refused to attend, but the party did happen. “Everybody wore black, and it was very subdued.”

The rest of sorority life, fortunately, could be a little more upbeat.

“Did you ever see the movie *Animal House*? There were elements of it that were sort of like that....” Karen laughs.

Carnegie Tech was a wet campus, so fraternities tended to have access to alcohol. Probably the reasoning behind it was that students would drink anyway, they might as well remain on campus where they were relatively safer.

“There was some dressing up and playing inappropriate music and dancing and drinking and drinking games,” Karen reminisces. “We’d play something called ‘signals’ and you had to go around the table



Kappa Alpha Theta pearl badge. Credit: Kappa Alpha Theta & Rawfactory LLC.

and remember the signals as they went around and if you couldn't remember the hand signals, then you had to chug your beer. I never dared to play that. I would watch and laugh at my friends."

The fraternities and sororities would often have mixers, where a fraternity might invite over a sorority on a Friday night. They could be theme parties or toga parties or perhaps just drinking parties. Sometimes, they could get a little wild.

"One mixer that Theta had with Delta Upsilon was held on a streetcar that was rented for the night. There were kegs on board, of course, and, well, things got a little out of hand when the DU's started mooning unsuspecting motorists from the trolley windows. Mind you, we were a kind of straight arrow sort of sorority. As far as I know, no one got in trouble for that."

For Karen, though, Greek life wasn't just about partying. Joe Mihm died in April of 1964. When the tragedy struck Karen's family in the spring of her freshman year, the Theta women rallied. They all came out to the funeral home, gathered around her and made her "feel like life would get back to some kind of normal."

Big Joe's friends all came, as well. Many of his old football friends were his pallbearers. "These big guys all came to the funeral home," Karen remembers. "And I had a friend there, and he said, 'Your father's friends are big bruisers.' And one of [my dad's] friends heard it and said, 'Her father was a big bruiser.'" Karen laughs as she recounts the memory, somber though the occasion was, the memory of her father was fond.

The death of her father hit her hard, and Karen needed the support of the Thetas, their friendship. "It meant everything to me, it was so comforting...not long after I returned to campus, everybody gathered in my room and brought me little presents and sang to me."

The Thetas weren't the only people who helped Karen during that time. When she began to worry that her family's financial situation could affect her situation at Carnegie Tech, she went to Warner Hall to find out what she could about financial aid. "A man in his office invited me in," she recalls. She doubts she knew even at the time who he was or what position he held. She would, however, remember decades later the advice he gave her when she speculated that perhaps she should leave school, earn some money, and then return.

"This total stranger spoke to me with so much conviction. 'Miss Mihm, do not leave school. In my experience, when students leave, life has a way of interfering. You will face adult responsibilities and your education will be

a brief memory. Do not leave school!'" Karen stayed in school.

I had asked Karen about significant interactions with her professors, but she had a hard time recalling any. She later explained to me, "I hypothesized that really the most meaningful interactions and the most inspiring people were fellow students."

FROM CARNEGIE TECH TO CARNEGIE MELLON

In 1967, Paul Mellon made the announcement that Carnegie Tech would be merging with the Mellon Institute to become Carnegie Mellon University. The announcement, made at Karen's graduation ceremony, caused a mild panic among the congregated students.

Rumors had abounded during the previous year that Carnegie Institute was becoming Carnegie University. In fact, sweatshirts with a "Carnegie University" logo were sold in the bookstore.

"It took us all by surprise," Karen comments. "We sort of wondered if it would have any impact on all of us trying to move on in the future. Would anybody have heard of this place that we went to?"

The concerns, though, were not terribly serious; at least Carnegie's name would remain in the title.

"We could see that the university was probably entering a new phase," Karen recalls. "It was going to be a university...I always thought of it as a triumvirate of colleges. There was three basic areas: The tech side, the art side, and then Margaret Morrison. And we could see that it was going to be more like a traditional set-up of a university, and that that was probably a good thing, especially with the influx of funds and status from the Mellon Institute."

The change didn't have quite so severe an impact on Karen. By the time the school's name changed, she had already been accepted into a graduate program at Case Western Reserve University.

BEYOND CARNEGIE

"I remember my mother saying to me, 'Karen, the friendships that you make in college are the friendships that will sustain through your life.' And that has sort of happened for me."

Long after Karen left Carnegie Tech, long after it had become Carnegie Mellon, she still maintains the friendships that began at school.

"They were probably the best and most long-lasting friendships, and they're the friendships I still have to this

day," Karen tells me. In fact, several of the sorority sisters managed to gather up a friend's house in Maine just a few summers ago. "That's what Carnegie was. Students are from all over the place. To maintain relationships when you're done with school, it takes some effort...but it's worth it."

Big Joe Mihm faced the same struggle. "He was friends with these guys his whole life, Natasha," Karen tells me. "He was like that, he kept friendships his whole life long. A lot of them had to do with Tech or the University of Pittsburgh football program." Even when Big Joe and his family were moved to California by the company he worked for, he managed to maintain those relationships. "They would be there on business, so I think that's one of the ways they'd keep in touch. When people traveled on business, they'd manage to get together somehow."

I'm more like Karen who has moved around quite a

bit since leaving Carnegie Mellon. Bouncing around from Texas to New York, back to Texas and finally to Pittsburgh, it's astonishing I've managed to establish any friendships at all. But I know I'll stay in touch with the people I've met here at Carnegie Mellon. Something about this community fosters the development of those long-standing relationships. But even in an age when it seems easier to stay in touch with people, between Facebook, texting, email, and the rest, maintaining those relationships takes work.

"It does require effort," Karen says, "but I think it's worth it."

I couldn't agree more.

N. Saidikowski is a first-semester graduate student at Carnegie Mellon University pursuing a Masters in Professional Writing. She is expected to graduate in December of 2015.



Baker Hall, Carnegie Mellon University

BRUCE COLEMAN