

RISING



WITH BREAD

SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAM SCATTERS MUCH MORE THAN CRUMBS UPON THE WATERS

BY SUE RARDIN

“Pretty much *every day* that I stepped onto the campus I got goose bumps and had tears in my eyes,” says Kimberly Lynch, CGS’04. “There is just one reason why I was able to go [to Penn] — and that was Bread.”

Lynch graduated in 2004, having worked full time during her student years while raising the five children in her blended family. The “Bread” she speaks of is Bread Upon the Waters, the School’s scholarship program for academically talented, financially qualified women over 30 who seek to earn a Penn bachelor’s degree by studying part time. The program’s name reflects the biblical injunction to give, trusting in future returns. Originating in the visionary enthusiasm of a Penn grad who knew full well the difficulties such women face, Bread is now 20 years old and benefits 25 women annually.

For many years, Kim Lynch’s second husband worked at night, caring for the children after school so she could keep her day job and take evening classes. Today she remains a natural multitasker, baking brownies while conducting a phone interview for this article.

Lynch was always strong academically, but like so many Bread scholars, her path to Penn wasn’t direct or easy. She married soon after high school, and a year-and-a-half later had a baby. That first husband proved physically abusive. She eventually left him, returned with her three children to her parents’ home and decided to study for an associate’s degree in chemistry at Burlington County

College. The night before her scheduled entrance exam, her ex-husband managed to hurt her again. She spent that night in the hospital, fearing she wouldn’t be allowed to leave the next morning. She was discharged, and with the support of her parents, took and passed the exam.

In 1999, she graduated from Burlington with a 3.8 GPA and with two medals for achievement in chemistry proudly hung on her bedroom mirror. By then, she had a strong second marriage, two great stepchildren and an unsettling new consideration: her chemistry professor urged her to apply to the College of General Studies.

As Penn’s home for mature adults returning to school, the College of General Studies (CGS) is important to the access goal of President Amy Gutmann’s Penn Compact: to make “an excellent Penn education available to all outstanding students of talent and high potential who can benefit from and contribute to our University.”

While CGS welcomes part-time students, it has limited scholarship aid to offer them. Administrators quickly became committed to the concept of Bread, says Elin Danien, CGS’82, G’89, Gr’98, the enthusiastic visionary whose idea — and whose seed gift of \$1,000 — launched the scholarship program 20 years ago. “CGS is the doorway to an Ivy League education for many people, and Bread makes that doorway wider.”

By now, 60 Bread scholars have graduated, more than half of them with honors and all of them with

a B average or better. CGS administrators, a Bread Advisory Board and Danien herself provide moral and program support.

Despite her chemistry prizes, academic record and acceptance by CGS, Lynch remembers telling Rhea Mandell, a former Bread coordinator, “I don’t even know why I’m here. Even if I get into the program, I have five small children, and there’s no way I can afford to go here.” Mandell told her about Bread and warmly encouraged her, and Lynch came. She majored in biology, eventually developing a DNA-sequencing procedure that, for the first time, enabled scientists to detect whether outbreaks of infections caused by the potentially harmful bacterium *listeria monocytogenes* involve the same strain. For that work, she now holds another award, this one from the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

These days Lynch travels widely as director of oncology services for a medical-education company while studying for a master’s degree and remaining much involved with her five teenagers. She and her son Chris, a stroke survivor, do volunteer work for the American Stroke Association, for which they raised \$5,000 in just one year — the year she graduated from Penn. “I don’t know when these women sleep!” exclaims founder Danien.

Trim and bright-eyed, Danien is a long-time volunteer guide at Penn’s University Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology as well as a Maya specialist and research associate there. She encourages Bread recipients by telling them her own

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Joy Bouldin

story. A child of the Depression, she enrolled at Penn at the age of 46, feeling academically shaky after attending 20 schools while growing up and then spending years away from the classroom. At a recent reception she exhorted new Bread recipients not to be cowed by age. “I was 68 when I got my Ph.D., I told them. ‘I’m 77 now, and 77 is the new 40.’ I want them to know it’s not too late. It’s never too late.”

Early on, Bonita Patterson, CGS’99, knew she had a gift for teaching. She also knew she needed more teaching skills and longed to go to Penn, but debated: “I can’t do this. I *can* do this! Back and forth.”

Finally, she went to the CGS office, was thrilled to learn about Bread and applied. Patterson won admission to Penn, but not a Bread scholarship, though she did receive a grant for a single course. She took the course, and then reapplied for a Bread scholarship. Again she received only a grant for another course. Now she was really motivated. “I thought, ‘That’s not going to stop me; I’m just going to keep on going.’” She did, and finally won that scholarship, graduated

with honors and later earned a master’s degree in education at Eastern University.

With a business partner, Patterson now runs New Life Alternatives, a state-licensed, non-profit preschool with 18 staff members, which serves 80 children from the age of one through first grade. Last year the kindergarten and first grade students took the SAT 10s, she says, and many of them scored in the 90th percentile nationally on some parts of the test.

The raw talents of other Bread scholars have similarly been boosted at Penn. Joy Bouldin is currently an anthropology major who has been exploring her gifts for creative nonfiction. Her essay “The Mississippi Diaries” was selected and published as Best Memoir 2003 by Philadelphia’s *City Paper* and the Blue Sky First Person writing competition. An award from the Zora Neale Hurston/Richard Wright Foundation enabled her to attend the 2003 African American Writers Symposium in Washington, D.C., and a fellowship from the Walker Foundation provided a summer residency at the Fine Arts Work

Center in Provincetown, Mass. This recognition, she says, reflects the Penn experience that has increased her intellectual depth and honed her writing skill.

The endowment providing scholarships for Lynch, Patterson, Bouldin and more than 60 other women has grown from Elin Danien’s \$1,000 to more than \$1,700,000. Fourteen of the 25 Bread scholarships now bear the names of donors who have caught the program’s excitement. One scholarship was recently endowed by CGS executive director Kristine Billmyer, who says that Bread’s “amazing” scholars represent the diversity of America. “They come to Penn with a sense of purpose and urgency, ready to give the relentless effort and focus needed to complete an undergraduate degree at Penn.”

Danien agrees. “I think any university would love to have scholars who all graduate with at least a B average and with more than 50 percent at the honors level. Our women beat the statistics.” ■

Sue Rardin writes for magazines, nonprofits and corporations.



For Paula A class was scheduled that evening, but a fierce ice storm had kept the professor and his students at home — except for one woman, who stood waiting in the vacant classroom. That was Paula Budnick, CGS’01. For 13 years, while earning her bachelor’s degree, Budnick never missed a class. • Before Penn, Budnick had been raising a daughter, recovering from drug addiction and working for Resources for Human Development, a big social-service agency. Promotions were offered, but she always demurred, explaining that she wanted more education first. • One day, her office mail included a brochure about Bread Upon the Waters, with a boss’s scrawl: “For Paula?” The brochure, she says, seemed like it was addressed to her: “Dear Paula — You too could earn a bachelor’s degree from Penn while working full time.” In that moment, she sensed a “subtle shifting of tectonic plates” that opened her way forward. She still has that inscribed brochure. • Today, Budnick holds a management role in her company. Drug free since 1985, she traces her recovery and growth largely to her job and her education. “You never know what seeds you’ve planted and who has walked in your shoes.” • What has Bread meant to her? “I don’t even know that I can express it in words, because my heart bursts every time — it just never ceases to amaze me. ... This has been a wonderful, miraculous opportunity.” —SUE RARDIN