

Martha Pellington, UVA 1984, Economics

transcript edited for clarity/brevity, but original message remains the same

Keera: Oh, let me see if I'm remembering this correctly – you were an economics major.

Martha: yes. I wanted to be an engineer; I was going to. I wanted to transfer to the engineering school. My dad was an engineer and the advising at UVA was just terrible – it was horrible – and so, I ended up making my own schedule and taking things like thermodynamics; I was like, so over my head; I didn't have any guidance whatsoever, so that dream went out the window. Also, there was a lot of beer drinking in those days going on because the drinking age when I went to UVA was 18; my RA's welcome to UVA party was behind Bonnie Castle in the Hancock dorms in that field and they had huge watermelons that had been spiked with vodka. Yeah, that was our welcome party. So, things were a little looser back then, but anyway, I loved math and math was just one of the things that came really easy to me and, you know, math is really only one component to engineering, it's really more physics and your spatial skills have to be really good, but I just didn't get into the right classes, so I just ended up being an econ major. I'm also big into writing, you know, I wish I had taken more English classes. What an incredible department. UVA's English and history departments are the two best departments in the liberal arts college in my opinion. I was a major in economics, and I went into advertising. I went in on the analytical part and I started in media planning and then I ended up in strategic planning and account work, so I thought I wanted to go into banking, because again, I'm good with math, and I was walking down, and I saw this little sign my third year saying "we're taking interns at the Virginia bank" so I got a job. I worked two days in the trust department. I had gotten enough credits by my 4th year, so I pretty much didn't need any to graduate and I had all this free time, so I did that; so, the good part about that was that I walked away saying I never want to work for a bank, ever. I ended up in advertising, which was a great fit for me because I found out I wanted a more creative experience but using my analytical skillset, so I was able to merge those two together which was great. So, I was in New York for a fair amount of years and then I ended up marrying the guy that I dated at UVA, my husband, but he lived in Baltimore, so I had to move down here. Then, I had to commute to Washington DC for seven years to an agency there and then through that, I had two kids and then got another job in Baltimore and had my third kid through that. So, I had three kids in under five years, and I quit that job and I did freelance for probably 10 years, which was good because it allowed me to kind of be a mom and work and then I got really involved with volunteering – I'm serving a lot of nonprofits or forwards in organizations. Two years ago, I started being a student again; so, I take classes at Johns Hopkins University. I took two semesters of genetics and one called integrative medicine and then I just finished one called understanding cancer. I mean, it is challenging because I didn't take a lot of – I was more an engineering – the sciences are very different than the biological sciences. So, my son was helping me – he was a biology major at UVA – so, that has been a great sense of joy for me to go back to school and just experience the love of learning and taking things I was too scared to take at UVA. So again, don't ever be scared to take something that might seem difficult, but, yeah, that's sort of where I am now and I kind of got re-engaged with UVA because

they invited me to be on the Board of Managers of the Alumni Association, so that's been fun. I mean, I don't know anybody on it, so there are people from all over the country and all over the world and all different decades of alumni and really impressive people – I mean, I do not feel nearly as accomplished, because, I mean, they are really accomplished. Now, I can come back to Charlottesville and see my daughter. I have three kids, but my son graduated in 2018 and my daughter's a graduate and I have a middle daughter, they went to Virginia Tech. And she got waitlisted at UVA when she turned out to be the best student – she graduated summa cum laude, Phi Beta Kappa, a rockstar academically, and then got waitlisted to UVA, and, I have to tell you this, but she got a better education in many ways than the other two because she also took a lot of advantage of the opportunities there and got connected with certain professors. She actually worked for a bunch of professors and did research, so she had a more fulfilling academic experience, I think, you know, I encourage you to get involved academically – that's why it's so frustrating that you're taking classes online, because you don't get to develop those relationships, but you will next year.

K: Awesome, that's really cool. So, how did you decide to come to UVA?

M: UVA was not my first choice. I was from Richmond, Virginia and I was the youngest of all three girls; I got no guidance, no parental involvement, but I think that that was sort of the way it was back then. Parents didn't spend all this time shuffling places to look at colleges. Parents just weren't involved. I don't know the difference between them being involved in my life academically and my involvement with my kids because it's like night and day. I was a ballet dancer too, and my college counselor was trying to get me to go to other schools and really wasn't interested in pursuing dance per se, as a major or anything, so I think I applied to Tulane, Georgia, Trinity, UPenn, and I got into most of them, and my parents just put me on a plane to go look at them. I hated them. I absolutely hated them. I kind of, just as a default, said I'll go to UVA because like 10 of my classmates were going to UVA so I thought at least it'd be fun. So, the minute I got on Grounds, I was like "I picked the right place." I can't even believe I wasn't even thinking about this place. I just loved it. I lived in Hancock dorms, which had no girls in it. I was the first group of girls to move into Hancock and there were no shower curtains in the bathroom because they didn't retrofit the bathroom. I literally would run to the bathroom, take my clothes off, take a shower, run back. It's very Spartan, shall we say. I just had such a great time, I really did, and it was a tremendous experience and the friendships I developed, I still have to this day. Honestly, the bad part is that the lack of advertising and a lack of guidance still exist today. I feel like it's a shame on UVA for not doing a better job because they pride themselves on the student being self-reliant and independent and, that's fine because, let me tell you, I did graduate being able to do pretty much anything because I couldn't rely on anybody. On the other hand I could have been an engineer which is what I really wanted to do. My son was a biology major in his guidance was horrible.

K: So, when you were a student at UVA, were women encouraged or discouraged for extracurriculars or was it just kind of mutual?

M: Honestly, I don't ever remember being an outsider as a woman at UVA, and it's weird because women came in 1970 and I came in at '80 and in 10 years, I mean, they must have done

everything, because when I got there, I felt like a complete equal. Guys treated me like a complete equal. The extracurriculars were a little disappointing to me, but I knew this in advance. I was a dancer and there was no dance team, and they had a couple of ballet classes and what I did was I went outside the university and found a local company that I could take classes with. I how to seek out things outside of the college I had a very active social life. I met my husband when I was a freshman, and he was a fourth year so I immediately got introduced to so many older kids and that was terrific in terms of understanding what classes and professors to take. I would also encourage you to engage with older students because they're going to tell you who to take from. I mean, that's where you get the insight. We didn't have TV back then. We had this old TV in the basement and there were three channels, and we didn't have streaming services or any of that, so we were outside. I would get out of class and we would go to this farm and go horseback riding or we would go hiking so we were outdoors a lot in an unstructured way – it wasn't through a club or anything like that. We just got a group of kids at the dorms and we all went out into the countryside. In fact, nobody lived really in apartments like they do now like on 14 Street. So, people lived kind of scattered all over Charlottesville; the students weren't so concentrated. Yeah, but I never felt discouraged or encouraged – it was really truly a coed experience, which was nice from me coming from an all-girls family and I went to an all-girls school, so it was really nice to just have a normal experience. Yes, I did join Greek life, mainly because, as I told you, I met some older girls and they encouraged me to join and that was good for the first couple of years and then I kind of got sick of it, but I went away abroad. Again, it was just another way for me to meet new people, but UVA is so big now. It was just another way to come up with a manageable size of people to get to know and you can make it what you want because the sorority is so big and I think over half of the students don't even do it, which I think is great because it doesn't dominate the school from what I understand. Okay, I'm just reading through your questions. "What was your transformative moment?" Okay, so my transformative moment was not at UVA, but it was during my college years, and that was going to France. I went to live with a French family in Paris and the challenging thing was all my classes were in French, so all of math, history, and art history. Then, I get home and my family would only speak French to me and so I didn't have a choice and I had to figure it out. It ended up being rewarding, but it was super challenging, and just being thrown into a big city was just incredible. I really encourage you to find an opportunity to go somewhere. I don't know, I think it's better education than sitting in a classroom in many ways, so if you have that opportunity, I would do it. My sister ended up doing it and then she ended up living in France for seven years. My older sister went to high school in Rome, so she ended up living in Italy for a certain amount of years. So, my parents really encouraged us to, like, spread our wings and make ourselves a little uncomfortable in different cultures. So, I would say that is was the most challenging thing, but, I also was going to say the other thing at school that was the most challenging – I think I mentioned this before – is the fact that nobody's looking out for you. I mean, you've gone from this isolated high school experience that's very, you know, supervised, shall we say, and then thrown out. Unfortunately, you haven't had that experience because you're at home, but you'll feel a little bit of that next year, but it was more about that nobody's looking out for you, nobody cares whether you go to class, nobody cares whether you failed a test, I mean you are literally in control of your whole destiny there, and you can shape it, screw it up, get back up, make it, you

know. My son took almost two years off and then he went out west and did Search and Rescue and EMT work and then he came back; everybody matures in a different way. So, I think that, in some ways, that was very frustrating to me about UVA, because, like I said, there was no guidance and no advice. But the good part of that is that you graduate with a lot of resourcefulness and self-reliance.

K: Yeah, I definitely think based off of just what you're saying. It has changed in some ways like there is more guidance than when you attended but it's more guidance of, I guess, how to be an adult. Like, "here's how to keep track of your mental health. Don't not go to all of your classes." Things like that. But, as far as advising, you definitely still have to seek it out, and if you don't know what you're looking for, then it's really hard.

M: Yeah, professors do not care if you don't show up to their class; they do research at the university, so if you think about it, their job is doing that, and secondarily, in order to do that, they gotta teach some undergrads.

K: Yeah, I've seen some of that and some people who went to actually teach. The difference is kind of funny.

M: Okay, so, relationships. I think I talked about how my friends get together and I go to reunions if I can, and I encourage you to do that. I was in econ, and maybe there were more guys than girls, but I wasn't even aware of it or it didn't have an impact on me at all. As far as what courses were taught by female professors, it was a joke. So, the only female professors were my French professors. In the econ department, I remember one woman who taught international relations and I think that was it. So yeah, I don't remember a lot of women professors, but I think it was because of the types of classes I was taking. one of my best friends was an English major there and she had a lot of women professors, so I really think it depends on the subject matter. I took art history and that was a woman. So, you can imagine in some of the classes, like the humanities, maybe there were more women, but the physics department was all men. Okay, so let's see, "what were your experiences with sexism or misogyny?" Okay, so culturally, it was a dating school when I went there. You always had a date for the football game. what's interesting in those days was you had a lot of women's colleges and a lot of guys would ask when would ask girls from those colleges and some of them would get really drunk and they didn't have any friends look after them so, you know, they would be put in compromising situations. When I look back upon it, some girls could have been, I don't know if the word "abused" is right, but I think those girls just sort of put themselves out there not knowing anybody. Because my friends and I were good friends with the guys, we weren't ever in a position that ever felt like anybody would disrespect me or take advantage of me. That might have to do with my husband he was 6 foot 4. I will tell you this really horrible term that some guys would use for women at UVA. It was called "U-bags". Have you heard this term?

K: No, but I don't think I'm gonna like it.

M: Yes, "U-bags" we were called because, back in the day, it was like all the girls who were smart enough to get to UVA were unattractive, that's why they had to bring in the ones from all the girls' colleges, and so I would hear this comment every now and then. It's disgusting, so

disgusting, and I didn't remember this until the Alumni Association put on something called Retold because we just had our 50th anniversary. I participated in that and it was just an incredible series of conversations and discussions from people from the first class through today, and somebody mentioned that term and I was like, "oh my god I do remember that." Yeah, I just, I think that was more of a sign of the fact that a lot of guys didn't want to date UVA girls; I guess we weren't attractive, or they wanted to go outside of UVA, and it was stupid, but it was such a message and I heard that from guys at UVA. Well, I can't imagine most guys at UVA think that way at all, I mean, first of all, the women outnumber the men. Not only undergraduate, by the way, I think they're starting to outnumber them at law school, and I'm not sure yet if the grad school is starting to outnumber the men, but every time I'm on campus, I was like "well everybody here is super attractive. Everybody's, you know, cute and young and fun and I wouldn't say that that clouded, my whole experience at all. I'm just giving you what I remember. "Was there an LGBT presence?" No, not at all. And I'm going to tell you something you're probably not going to believe. I never knew what gay was growing up. "Gay" was the name of my aunt. Yeah, and apparently, if you are gay, you just didn't tell anybody, so it wasn't even in your realm of consciousness. Yeah, you weren't even prejudiced against people like that because this wasn't even your reality. Since then, I know two guys in my husband's fraternity who came out and, you know, when they came out was like, oh yeah, yeah, that's probably right. It makes me sad that we didn't have the culture where they could feel comfortable, where today it's like not a big deal. But my kids say it's not a big deal. It just wasn't even in our consciousness.

K: Did you feel pressure to go into a certain field during your time at UVA?

M: Well, nope, I wish I had, you know. So, the disparity in the population of men and women in my major, I just can't remember. I was in econ. My roommate was in econ and a bunch of guys were. But you know, just like you, I have a lot of really smart girlfriends. I mean girls in the engineering school, my first-year roommate was an art major, I mean, I would say it ran the gamut. It was across the board, and they were just super impressive, interesting women and I never felt – if I had more boys in a class, I don't know. I never even thought about it and it just didn't affect me.

K: Do you know of any efforts your institution has made to become more inclusive?

M: What's "my institution?" Are they talking about UVA?

K: Yeah, like, have they tried to make everything more inclusive since you left?

M: Well, I know being part of the Alumni Association, that's a big part of it. So, yeah, I can speak on that. They definitely have all these proactive programs to make people feel inclusive and especially when some people graduate, as you probably know with your high school experience, and you'll never see them again. "Get me the heck out of here and I'm done." So, the Alumni Association doesn't want to just completely lose track of everybody, and so it's always trying to bring people back and engage them, not just for reunions but maybe offering programs that people might be interested in or career help. And you'll find that at UVA, to me, not everybody has a great experience at UVA, and so I think that I've seen a lot of concerted effort to try and engage alumni no matter what background or what race wherever you are, which is nice

to see, and it's a challenge because, you know, some people don't want that – they want to graduate and move.

K: What was the relationship and hookup culture like during your time at UVA?

M: Oh yeah, like I was saying, it was a formal dating culture back then. Every football game. Not only do you have a date, you dress up, I mean you wear a skirt or a dress, and they had a big buffet before the game and a lot of alumni and parents would come back and it was kind of nice, but there wasn't this casual hookup culture at all. In fact, if you did, you would just be so humiliated the next day, you'd crawl under a rock. This poor girl, I mean she had to leave the school. I can't remember the specifics, but it was on my first year and her name was Betty, and by November she was gone. She had hooked up with like five guys and everybody was talking about it and she just couldn't handle it and I felt so horrible for her. And you know I can't really get a sense of it my daughter hasn't had a boyfriend or dated anybody, and it made me kind of sad for both of my kids because I don't care if you're dating your same sex or opposite, you're never going to be in a place where you have this many kids your age that have this much free time. I don't want her to do I did necessarily, but I think that's part of growing up and then you hear when you graduate – like my middle daughter, when she went to DC, she's like “Oh my God it's so hard to meet people when you graduate.” I hate to say it I mean people in their late 20s have to use those programs or services and they kind of regret not having more relationships in college. I don't know. I have mixed feelings about that, and I don't know how you feel about that, but the hookup culture – I'm not sure it is the healthiest culture, particularly for women. I think women are very emotional human beings and they would process a one-night casual thing very differently than a man, so that makes me sad that that is the pervasive norm and maybe you can tell me that it's not.

K: I mean yeah, I can speak on it, but like I really don't know much about it because I have a long-term boyfriend, so I don't know how that is. I mean I'm from a small rural conservative town, so it wasn't a huge, big thing – I mean people slept together, but it was you know whispered about I mean there are derogatory names for women but of course nothing like that happens for guys.

M: Right, so there's still that double standard.

K: was there any talk about consent or respect?

M: No, there was no talk for every single person So, I will tell you an interesting story my son graduated from U VA he's now 27 he started dating a girl in November and then on Valentine's Day he had this official ask about “Will you be my girlfriend?” So, I was like, “Oh, okay, that needs to be communicated?” and he goes “Yeah it needs to be a very official kind of thing” and I asked my daughters and they're like “Yeah, that's pretty normal.” Like, okay, that's new to me. Um, but I guess that's good to kind of know where you both stand on something.

K: Is there something you learned at UVA that you apply to your life now?

M: Yes. Self-reliance, being resourceful, knowing how to work with all kinds of people, being proactive. With the alumni community, my UVA friends are my longtime friends and my high

school friends are my longtime friends too you know so I feel like my best UVA friends aren't anywhere near I live they're kind of spread all over the country, so when we get together it's just like yesterday, but I don't get to see them on a regular basis.

K: What is the legacy of women at UVA?

M: Okay, what I wrote here is that from the minute they arrived on campus in the early 70s they were as smart or smarter than the men and they now represent a majority of undergraduates and, I believe, the majority of the professional undergraduate programs. They're go getters and an impressive group of women who will make a significant impact in the world. I thought that back then and I think that today – I don't think that's changed.

K: What's a piece of advice you'd give to a first-year woman going to UVA?

M: God, where do I begin? Make your education go way beyond the classroom, and I know that your generation is obsessed with grades, but when I'm hiring somebody, in less you had a 1.0, I couldn't care less whether it was a 3.9 or 3.2. I want to know that you can write, you can communicate, you have great presence, the value of tremendous people skills, those are things that are going to get you through your career because you're going to be working with different people, and you can be the smartest person but if you're difficult to work with... expand your friend group and meet new people, join different clubs; now, you have so many options of what you can do, you know, and don't spread yourself too thin, but try and take an abroad program. I think we talked about engaging in meaningful relationship with significant others. Oh, be proactive with your professors and resourceful when it comes to pursuing opportunities that will introduce you to different career paths. Internships, internships, internships. You don't have to wait to your third year; my daughter went up to New York her second year and worked for Washington Square films and lived in the NYU dorms, which was a great experience. Or, you could just get a summer job. When you build that resume, just having little bits of exposure to different businesses will help you figure out what you might like and what you don't like. It's more than just the actual work; it's like, I hated the fact that there was a business dress code in banking, and I was in pantyhose and skirt. There's so many dynamics about a job that you quickly kind of get a sense of when you get to spend a month or so doing different things, so I encourage you to do those.

K: What's the biggest difference in terms of your experience at UVA and what is going on now?

M: I think one thing is that, as much as I am sure of, a lot of traditions at UV or the same in the culture is somewhat the same. What I am not crazy about is your generation's competitiveness with each other and I think this is more at UVA than other schools; I mean, when I look at Virginia Tech it was the most collaborative creative school in terms of teamwork and helping each other and UVA, it seems to be – and this is an exaggeration – “It's all about me, and here's my resume – let me paste it to my chest and this is what I've done” and so on. I'm going on the lawn and someone actually posted their resume and all their accomplishments. They go to this school and they don't think any other school can compare, and it's just, I don't know, it's disappointing. It's disappointing for me to see that, because, back in our day, I mean, it's still a state school, you know, it's a great school, but it's no better than other schools. So, I don't like

that feeling and I don't like when I hear UVA students talk down about Virginia Tech or another school because, guess what, their kids are just as smart and will probably do better than a lot of people.