

BY DAVID SWEET

## The Coed Experiment

For well over a century, Emma Willard has educated young women with nary a male graduate. Yet less than 30 years ago, the school not only taught teenage boys during the winter months—it housed them, fed them, and in all ways welcomed them.

I speak as a student from Deerfield Academy who enjoyed living at the Troy campus during an exchange program in 1981—and as the only son of an alumna to ever attend the all-girls school.

For a handful of years, as the disco era started to fade and the Reagan administration dawned, Deerfield

(then a single-sex school) and Emma Willard swapped students for a trimester in the winter. About 15 juniors and seniors were exchanged, along with a faculty member on each side, to see what it was like two hours away in another state of the country—and another state of mind.

After being embedded for more than 20 months at Deerfield, where few girls were visible save when they were bused in for the painful weekend dances (Me: Would you like to dance? Girl: No.), I jumped at the chance to spend January through March in Troy. Trading my Deerfield necktie and mandatory sit-down meals for the blue jeans and buffets of Emma Willard—along with being one of a handful of boys among 300 girls, which seemed far better odds than those dances—was too appealing to ignore.

So I flew into Albany one winter night and headed to campus. The Deerfield crew gathered on the first floor of Kellas, where we all had roommates (almost all dorm rooms at Deerfield were singles). Most rooms had adjoining bathrooms, giving us our own sinks; at Deerfield, one common bathroom lay at the end of each corridor. In a bizarre twist for teenage boys, the Emma Willard bathrooms were equipped only with baths, not showers (more on that to come).

I quickly became involved in activities at my new school, ones I was too timid to try at Deerfield. The presence of girls, who were less likely to laugh at shortcomings and could even be encouraging at times,



David Sweet, a Deerfield student, reads a script during acting class with an Emma Willard student in 1981.

inspired me to song. I joined a coed singing group, where we visited campus dining halls and sang The Beatles' "Twist and Shout." Later on, four of us from Deerfield entered a talent show as The Who. With a tape of "Baba O'Riley" blasting, we mimicked the song with guitars, a drum set, and microphones. In the role of Pete Townshend, I remember sliding toward the edge of the stage, and the cheers and gasps of the female crowd were inspiring. For a shining moment, I understood the thrill of being a rock star (though unlike Townshend, I did not smash my guitar at the show's end).

Though I never acted at Deerfield, I joined the play *Our Town* at Emma Willard. Admittedly, the part was small: I stuck out my hand, said, "Looks like rain," and opened an umbrella.

While one might expect Deerfield boys were stared at as if exotic creatures or visitors from another planet, as far as I could tell the girls shrugged off our temporary presence. On our side, though none of us walked around mouth agape, we had no doubt we had lucked into a once-in-a-lifetime situation.

I don't remember much about my academic experience at Emma Willard because the presence of girls in the classroom was a little too beguiling. At Deerfield, I might have gone months without seeing a girl (save the random faculty member's daughter walking by). Now I was surrounded by them. I think those who say single-sex schools are conducive to high achievement because there are no distractions (read: no members of the opposite sex) are correct.

I myself was distracted quite a bit, mainly by a girl named Nancy Low. My roommate offered to play matchmaker and invited her to visit us in our room one Friday evening. Given our appropriate last names, her friends stuffed her bureau drawers with packets of Sweet and Low around the same time.

We knew the rules during visiting period. Light on, doors open, feet on the floor. As it turned out, I didn't need the rules. Even before Nancy arrived, my feet fled through the open door as I rushed to the laundry room, where I spent the entire visiting hour rationalizing to myself why I needed to do wash on a Friday night. The presence of a real live girl—and the idea of a date, even of the modified prep school variety—was more than this timid teen could handle. Any meaningful chance for a relationship had been ruined.

Perhaps I should have braced myself with a few drinks—after all, the drinking age in New York State was 18, while it was 20 in Massachusetts, and a number

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of us would wander a block or two off campus every so often to a convenience store and buy whatever we wanted. I'm not sure we even needed IDs.

Ironically enough, drinking had nothing to do with my one disciplinary incident at the school. Tired of taking baths, one morning I snuck up to the second floor where showers were plentiful. I lathered and rinsed like a prisoner leaving solitary confinement, my first shower in more than a month. But as I crept downstairs, the corridor master caught me and sentenced me to a week of cleaning at a nearby preschool.

As spring arrived, I strolled about the campus, thinking of how much my mother, Nancy Frederick Sweet, said she'd liked Emma Willard when she attended the school in the 1940s. According to lore, in those days maids cleaned the rooms and scurried after the girls with pots of hot tea when they skated in the winter. Those privileged days had disappeared, but the beauty of the campus had not—those large Gothic buildings with gargoyles captivated me, as did the woods nearby.

When my mother was on the Board of Trustees and was called to a meeting in 1996, I returned with her and my father soon after I had moved to New York City. We toured the campus, enjoyed dinner with the principal, and talked with a few of the students. Fifteen years after the exchange program, I again stayed in a dorm room. But at my advancing age, any Bohemian excitement over a small sparse room had worn off, and sleep in the tiny bed was fitful. But I did get a shower. **e**

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