

Project: “What a time we had ... women remember Drake”

Interviewee: Mary Clark Brubaker, Drake University, class of 1957 (FA)

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Interviewer: Emily Curtis (JMC 171)

(Interviewer): Everyone wants to find her place in the college experience. Students look for the people they have something in common with, the ones they know will somehow have an impact on their life and will stay in touch with long after graduation. When Mary Brubaker thinks back on her Drake experience, she knows exactly who these people were: her tight-knit group of friends in the theater department. Brubaker, a 1957 Drake alumna, came to college with very definite career aspirations. Born in 1935, Brubaker knew from a young age what she wanted to do with her life. Drake was also where she first found her passion for the theater.

Mary: I loved the theater; in fact, I had fallen in love with the theater when I was about 14 years old and went over to Drake University to the Old Main Theater, now called Sheslow, and saw a children’s theater production. It was ‘Tom Sawyer’ and I sat up in the balcony. I still remember where I sat and how I just absolutely fell in love with the theater that day and thought, “This is what I want to do.”

(Interviewer): Later on in life, Brubaker came across a quote by author Graham Greene, which she said reminded her of her experience at Drake that day as a child.

Mary: He said one time, something like, “There comes a moment in childhood when a window opens and lets the future in,” and I’ve always thought that that was the moment, in a way that let my future in because that’s when I decided that theater is what I wanted to do with my life.

(Interviewer): Despite the skepticism of her parents, who thought she should pursue a more practical profession, Brubaker decided she wanted to be an actress and majored in theater at Drake. During her college career, one professor in particular stood out to her, Dr. James J. Fiderlick.

Mary: He was a marvelous, warm, enlightened, loving man who also loved the theater and he was beloved by his students, especially the alums. We now have a Drake Theater Alumni group that gives scholarships to theater students and created the James J. Fiderlick

award after him. We hear from students from decades ago every year when they make their donations to our scholarship fund.

(Interviewer): Brubaker said growing up and during college, her love of the theater brought her and her sister to the Varsity Theater quite often.

Mary: I loved the Varsity. The Varsity is an icon theater in this town. Even before I went to Drake, my sister and I used to spend many, many happy hours in the Varsity Theater and it really hasn't changed that much since then. It was a great place.

(Interviewer): Brubaker said within the theater and fine arts department, she began to make lifelong friends and close relationships.

Mary: The theater department is like a family. I brought with me to Drake one of my best friends from high school. His name was Jerry Douglas. He was a brilliant playwright, he was funny, he was wild and woolly and we had wonderful times. There was a group, and we were all in theater and became pretty close friends.

(Interviewer): In fact, Brubaker even married a fellow fine arts major. As a freshman, Brubaker began dating her future husband, Ted Brubaker, an art major. They had met in high school when Brubaker and her sister began modeling for summer art classes.

Mary: All through my years until my junior year when we were married, I would have to say he was my special person. [smiles]

(Interviewer): Brubaker said enthusiasm was always plentiful and encouraging in the fine arts department.

Mary: There was certainly a spirit in the fine arts department. Frank Jordan was the Dean then and he was wonderfully supportive, as well as his wife Alice. There were so many talented, interesting people and I think that maybe all departments have their own contribution to the spirit of the university, but not being a big fan of the sports activities, my spirit group all were in fine arts.

(Interviewer): After graduating from Drake, Brubaker went to work full time for The Des Moines Register and Tribune Co., which she had worked for part-time in school. Brubaker also became involved in radio broadcasting.

Mary: They had a radio station attached to the paper in those days, KRNT, and some of us who were drama students used to read the funny paper over the weekend on KRNT radio. So those early

days on the radio on KRNT introduced me to some of the local radio personalities and later TV personalities that I would later work with, so it was interesting that that happened.

(Interviewer): Eventually, Brubaker was given the chance to put some of her acting and journalistic skills to work on the Mary Jane Odell show, a local talk show on KRNT-TV. Brubaker was offered the position of “exercise girl,” on the recommendation of a fellow Drake theater major. After a couple-year stint as an exercise girl, and a brief hiatus from the media to get her teaching certificate, Brubaker auditioned for talk show host when Odell moved to Chicago.

Mary: I ended up never teaching and going on television live in 1967, and I was on live almost every day until 1995 when I retired.

(Interviewer): Throughout her time as talk show host, Brubaker had the opportunity to interview hundreds of famous guests, including comedian Richard Pryor, TV actress Loretta Swit of “MASH” fame, Sen. Edward Kennedy of Massachusetts and anthropologist Margaret Mead. Brubaker also had multiple articles written about her in *The Iowan* magazine, was featured on the cover of *The Register's Datebook* and was also featured in a *National Geographic* magazine story. Although it is obvious that Brubaker’s experience in the theater department was a major part of her college experience and helped to shape some of the relationships she still has today, Brubaker said if she could do it over again, she would have also pursued journalism in college.

Mary: I think as I look back now and I admire broadcast journalism, especially the business; the investigative journalists, I think I would have liked to combine that [journalism] with my career, because I obviously didn’t go off to Broadway to become a famous actress---I really think now, because journalism has become such a force in the world, I would have liked to have been a part of that.

(Interviewer): As Brubaker contemplates her college years and life since then, she has some words of advice to students about to graduate and start a new chapter in their lives.

Mary: There are so many things that [graduates] need to hear but they won’t pay any attention to until they are closer to my age and realize that that’s what life is about---I think that people now have to think about their own responsibility toward making this a better world and what they can do every day to accomplish that. I think

that service to fellow man is what we pay to live in this planet. I think we all owe the world our services in some way to make it a better place than when we came into it.