

The Rich Heritage of Marymount

Kayla Begg & Brendan McNerney

*“There was a very rich heritage and culture associated with . . . Marymount. . . we were not going to just merge and be Loyola University.”
Irma Brown Dillon, Marymount Alumnus*

In the post-merger period, it is tempting to view the Centennial History of LMU primarily through the lens of the Jesuits at Loyola. But before they were one, Loyola University and Marymount College each translated their own distinct religious traditions into unique educational experiences for their students. Thus, the recollections of the women of Marymount College remind us of the rich heritage of the Religious of the Sacred Heart of Mary, a heritage which not only defined Marymount, but which also helped to shape the institutions and history of Loyola Marymount University.

The Religious of the Sacred Heart of Mary (RSHM) was founded in France in 1849 by a group of women dedicated to service for those in need; some of their first acts included operating an orphanage and a women’s shelter. According to the order, their works of social justice were inspired by Christ’s words: “I came so that they might have life and have it more abundantly” (John 10:10).

Over time, as the order grew, it spread geographically to Ireland, Portugal, England, and the eastern United States, and began an increasing focus on education, primarily of women and girls. According to the RSHM, establishing schools was not only a service to those whom they educated, but was also a way to develop young Christian women who could then engage in service for others. The efforts of the RSHM in higher education were highly successful: in 1919, Marymount College in Tarrytown, New York received its 4-year accreditation. Just over a decade later, in 1932, the first Archbishop of Los Angeles, John Joseph Cantwell, invited the order to establish Marymount College in Los Angeles. Originally located adjacent to Marymount High School on Sunset Boulevard in Westwood, the college began as a two-year institution under the supervision of Sr. Gertrude Caine, R.S.H.M. By the late 1940s, the college received its 4- year accreditation. Reflecting the essence of the RSHM, Marymount College was, and continues to be “dedicated to the development of the whole person, and inspired by the belief that we are all united by our common heritage as children of God.”

Following the structural evolution from a 2-year to a 4-year institution, Marymount College changed its physical location, moving from its Westwood location on Sunset Boulevard to the campus at Rancho Palos Verdes in 1960. Later in that same decade, Marymount College moved once again as it began the affiliation process with Loyola and in 1973, the two schools officially merged as Loyola Marymount University.

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In the years prior to the merger, Marymount College's two locations could not have been more distinct. The first location on Sunset Boulevard was directly across from the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA) and was part of a bustling urban, social scene. Gail Lammersen Belt, who was part of the last class to attend Marymount at its original location, explained that "since we were so close to Westwood Village, we often would go down to Westwood . . . [it] was about 6 blocks away so you could walk or you could drive." Students, according to Lammersen Belt, would frequent popular hangouts such as the Village Delicatessen and Wil Wright's ice cream parlor. In contrast, Irma Brown Dillon who attended Marymount in the late 1960s at the Palos Verdes location, described the campus as "isolated." "We were on the top of a hill," said Brown Dillon, "surrounded by the Pacific Ocean."

Despite the stark difference in physical locations, throughout its history, Marymount College remained a small, yet tight-knit campus that fostered strong social bonds. Marymount graduate, Sr. Renee Harrangue, who attended the Westwood campus in the 1950s, explained that the development of close personal relationships was an integral part of the Marymount experience. According to Harrangue, this was in part "...because it was a small institution so people knew each other, they cared about each other." Similarly, Irma Brown Dillon remembered how small Marymount College was, even after its relocation to Palos Verdes. "It was a very small campus," Brown Dillon recollected, "you could stand on one end of the campus and look to the other end." According to Harrangue, the small campus and student body facilitated the creation of life-long relationships. "People are still in touch with their roommates that they had at that time. . . . To this day when we have alumni reunions I see people from the Marymount College at Westwood coming back, Marymount Palos Verdes coming back and it's just like they're meeting family again."

The strong sense of community was evidenced by the recollections of both Lammersen Belt and Brown Dillon, who remembered the "smokers" at both the Westwood and Palos Verdes locations respectively. Both women described the "smokers" as the center of the social life at Marymount College. As smoking was only permitted in designated communal rooms within each dorm building, most girls gathered there in the evenings to socialize with friends. The rooms themselves were thus affectionately called "smokers," despite this being the very least of their uses.

In addition to fostering a tight-knit community with strong social bonds, Marymount College also established a strong sense of order. Gail Lammersen Belt explained that the Religious of the Sacred Heart of Mary was a unique order. "They were founded in France and they kind of went with French ways of doing things..." According to Lammersen Belt, "Mothers," who were originally addressed as "Madame," were the professors and educators while the "Sisters" did tasks such as housekeeping and food preparation. Lane Bove, who attended Marymount in the late 1960s, remembered this same structure at Palos Verdes. There

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were “Mothers” Bove noted, “but there were also, unfortunately, a second tier of sisters ...who cleaned our rooms for us everyday.”

This rigid social structure within the order was mirrored by a strict code of conduct that defined Marymount College until its merger with Loyola. “It was a whole different world...” Lammersen Belt noted. “I look back on it now and it’s really funny except that we took it for granted of course. The rules were very strict.” Similarly, Brown Dillon remembered: “we had curfews, we had dress codes. We had bed inspections. We had room inspections...” Explaining further, Brown Dillon described a world in which the women of Marymount College had to abide by dress codes that prevented them from going out barefoot or wearing anything other than a skirt or dress in “public,” which meant outside the private dorm rooms. Students were also required to maintain a neat living space and to respect curfew rules. Punishments included being “locked out” from their rooms, or being “campused,” which meant having to stay on campus from Friday to Sunday. Lane Bove recalled running down the hall in jeans one day to answer an unexpected long distance phone call. The consequence: she was campused. “To this day,” Bove remembered laughingly, “I felt it was unfair.”

At Marymount College, the strict codes of conduct were offset by a vibrant academic environment, which adhered to the same principles as Loyola: academic excellence and education of the whole person. At Marymount, this meant that young women were encouraged to develop themselves both inside and outside of the classroom. “The classes were small,” Brown Dillon remembered. “You really had an opportunity to interact with the professors.” It was, according to Brown Dillon, “a very rich academic environment.” Bove echoed Brown Dillon’s sentiments. “I was a history major and English minor. And in fact, everybody at that time had a theology and philosophy minor...so academically I was very challenged.” Lammersen Belt described the opportunities on the Westwood campus to develop leadership skills outside of the classroom such as the Model United Nations and student government; Bove described leadership opportunities such as student government as affirming of women. Reflecting specifically on the education of the whole person, Bove stated, “I think the thing that was most important in my development from my Marymount years was the affirmation that I could do or be anything I wanted to do or be. And that’s pretty powerful.”

In the years before the merger, the challenging academic environment and the education of the whole person were not the only shared thread between Loyola and Marymount. During Lammersen Belt’s time, in the late 1950s, in a culture and era that encouraged early marriage and family-making, the initial and continued interaction between Loyola University and Marymount College was due to the Catholic dating scene, an aspect of college life that Lammersen Belt remembered fondly: “Loyola was in a fortunate position, because this was an era when parents wanted their children to marry within the Catholic faith if they were Catholic. Most of us wanted that too ... So obviously it was encouraged to socialize with the guys at Loyola as opposed to the guys at USC or UCLA ...” Brown Dillon also remembered the social interaction between the

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women at the Palos Verdes campus and the men at Loyola. “If there were dances we were always invited. If there was an event that required escorts, the guys were always coming up on campus.” To synchronize the social calendars of Loyola with Marymount and the other women’s Catholic colleges in the area, students created an Intercollegiate Publicity Committee. Lammersen Belt, who took part in the formation of the committee, explained that “the whole point of it was simply to coordinate major campus events to avoid conflicts... That was, I would say, where we first began getting very involved with Loyola.”

Not surprisingly, as social contact between Marymount College and Loyola University grew, so also did the realm of social service. According to Lammersen Belt, an important step toward strengthening the bond between the schools was to help create the Loyola Belles, a service organization comprised of women from the local Catholic colleges. The group initially began when Loyola students suggested that the women become cheerleaders for their sports events—however, with powerful Marymount women at the helm, the group instead evolved into a service organization. “The idea was that they were to not only represent their women’s college well, but they were to represent Loyola well. It was considered a definite honor to be named a Loyola Belle,” Lammersen Belt stated. The Belles still exist to this day as a service organization on LMU’s campus, reflecting the continued presence of the legacy of Marymount.

With the confluence of academic excellence, education of the whole person, and the promotion of social justice and service, [not to mention a lively dating scene] it would seem that the merger of Marymount College and Loyola University would have occurred without any reservation. But that was not the case. While Loyola men were mourning the loss of their 9-hole golf course to the construction of the women’s dorm, the Marymount women were equally reticent. As Lane Bove stated “my ... class of ’69 really did not want to be [at Loyola]. We liked Marymount College the way it was.” In a powerful gesture, these senior women took one of the lounges of their dorm on the Westchester Campus and renamed it the Bluestocking Lounge, a reference to a historical term used to describe independent, learned, intellectual women. According to Bove, the Bluestocking Lounge “kind of became our sacred spot.”

And so the debate over the name, addressed at length elsewhere, takes on new meaning with both the history of Marymount women and their reticence revealed. Indeed, the name of the University speaks not only to the educational experience created by the Jesuits, but also to the rich heritage of the Religious of the Sacred Heart of Mary, and to the now seamless narrative created by the merger of Loyola men and Marymount women.