

The last president of Shimer College



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Dr. Susan E. Henking. Photo courtesy of Shimer College

On June 4, 1895 Mrs. A.J. Sawyer spoke to the graduating class of Mount Carroll Seminary in Illinois. The topic of her address was What Becomes of the Girl Graduates? It was reprinted in that summer's edition of the Seminary's newspaper The Oread.

“Progress is not determined by the amount of intelligence or intellectuality on deposit at any one time or place but by it’s diffusion,” Sawyer said. “With the education of women has come a diffusion and an intangible influence as permeating, as unobtrusive and almost as universal as light through space.”

One of Mount Carroll’s first teachers Frances Shimer, who went on to take co-ownership of the seminary and was rarely away from the campus since it opened in 1853, could not be there for the 1895 Commencement. For the sake of her health, “our General”, as faculty and friends called her, had been spending more time in Florida.

Shortly before she retired one year later, Shimer made the decision to merge the all-girls seminary with the University of Chicago. She wanted what she called “a cause for which together we are laboring” to continue on in her beloved institution as the Frances Shimer Academy of the University of Chicago.

It was a matter of long-term sustainability and, for the 116 years which followed its founder’s death in 1901, Shimer College not only survived but became economically, socially and culturally symbiotic with the turbulent history of the world around it.

On May 20, 2017 Windy City Times received an announcement from Shimer alumnus and Board of Trustees member Robert Keohane which concluded the college’s 164-year legacy with a cursory statement.

“Shimer as an independent college will cease to exist.”

“The Board of Trustees of North Central College formally voted to implement the Asset Purchase Agreement of last August which provides for Shimer College to become Shimer Great Books School of North Central College as of June 1, 2017,” Keohane wrote. “This decision represents the culmination of a 20-month effort to find a way for the Shimer program to continue in a sustainable fashion.”

Keohane noted that 34 students would transfer to the Great Books School on North Central College’s campus in Naperville, Illinois.

While crediting Shimer’s 14th President Dr. Susan E. Henking, Ph.D., who was hired in 2012, as playing a “crucial role in our success,” Keohane stated that she would be “ending her affiliation with the College as of May 31.”

In his Nicomachean Ethics, Aristotle wrote “if therefore, there is some end of our actions that we wish for on account of itself, the rest being things we wish for on account of this end, and if we do not choose all things

on account of something else—for in this way the process will go on infinitely such that the longing involved is empty and pointless—clearly this would be the good, that is, the best.”

Henking spoke to Windy City Times by phone from a condo that had been rented by Shimer College. She said she was surrounded by boxes.

Packing is a task most people try to put it off until the last minute. Perhaps such procrastination is not merely due to the labor of placing memories in cardboard containers and sealing them shut. Perhaps there is a loneliness in the finality of the act and being forced to reflect upon the decisions which led to it.

Henking had known this day, this end of her actions at Shimer, was coming for some time. Yet it was a course Henking chose for the good of Shimer after what she described as “many, many years of financial difficulty.”

“It was so bad that, for decades, students worried that they would be the last class of Shimer College,” she said. “Becoming part of North Central allowed the smaller class sizes and a lot of things to stay that were central to the educational mission in a much more financially stable environment. The faculty all kept their jobs and students got comparable or better financial aid.”

Since packing up and moving has been a part of Shimer’s institutional history, Henking at first looked upon it with a degree of pragmatism.

“[Shimer] moved from Mount Carroll to Waukegan to Bronzeville and now Naperville,” she stated. “So, on the one hand, the people of the institution are used to change. In this one [Shimer] gave up its autonomy. For everyone involved there’s a sense of loss and gain. Every generation of students has its own version of the college. They’re running a committee this summer to figure out how to be a part of a new institution but still recognizably Shimer.”

Henking’s voice trailed off as if there was something she wanted to add but that she censored perhaps for the sake of formality. The interview was only ten minutes old.

“Over the course of a lifetime, I have come to understand that I cannot pursue ideas alone,” she told to Perry Garfinkel and the New York Times in 2013. “Nor can I strive to change the world unless I engage others, whether those who spit on me or those with whom I share my life. I still wrestle with the tensions of differences and uncertainty. As Shimerians say, we steer between reality and utopia.”

Henking’s reality began in 1955 in the small Pennsylvania town of Paoli long before it was annexed as a Philadelphia suburb.

“My parents met in World War II,” she recalled. “My mother was an Irish Protestant. My father was an Irish Catholic. So, it was to the great dismay of some family members. But it was a reasonably happy family. My father was a printer and manual laborer his whole life. My mom was a secretary. We lived in a less wealthy area but I went to good public schools.”

Serving in World War II had left Henking’s father disenchanted with Catholicism. So, she and her elder sister were raised under what she called the “social justice” Protestantism of her mother. It had polar effects on the siblings. While her sister became one of the earliest female Episcopalian Priests, it was as an undergraduate student at Duke University that Henking discovered “I actually and actively hated religion.”

“My sister and I used to joke that she took God and I took everything else,” Henking said.

Yet, she decided to major in Religious Studies.

“I was trying to understand why people are religious,” she asserted. “I had emerged from a religious setting to be pretty hostile and fascinated by it. I got very interested in theoretical explanations for why people would believe what I thought was patently untrue. For some, religion is the source of dramatic happiness and social change. For others, it’s horrifyingly oppressive and can really hurt people.”

Despite relishing the academic challenges her chosen course of study provided, Henking recalled having “an emotionally difficult time in college. My parents raised me to think I could do anything I wanted to which turned out not to be true. My father thought I was perfect. Most of the rest of the world does not think that about me or about anyone else.”

She was in the midst of both the seventies and “a hotbed of lesbian feminism”—also known as the Research Triangle of Duke, North Carolina State University and the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

The journal *Feminary* emerged from Chapel Hill.

“We want to encourage feminist and lesbian organizing in a region whose women suffer greatly in their lack of political power,” it’s publishers wrote. “We want to provide an audience for Southern lesbians who may not think of themselves as writers but who have important stories to tell—stories that will help to fill the silences that have obscured the truth about our lives and kept us isolated from each other. We want to know who we are. We want to change women’s lives.”

“I can intellectualize anything,” Henking said. “I met people who were politically active but, at the time, I didn’t know anything about Stonewall. I was having these feelings so I went to the library. The first book I

read was Del Martin and Phyllis Lang's Lesbian/Woman. I also went to parties and festivals. A bunch of people went to Newport News [Virginia] where Anita Bryant was doing one of her rants. The place was filled with police but they were there to protect us. What changed my life and what I reflect on a lot were the crowd who looked like the people I had grown up with who were spitting and throwing things at us. It was a transformative moment but coming out was difficult in many respects."

A politically charged Henking arrived in Chicago in 1977 on a scholarship for post graduate studies at the University of Chicago Divinity School.

"I was briefly the head of the Gay Liberation Front and I was really active with a group of mostly lesbian people," she recalled. "There were gay and lesbian people in the Divinity School but nobody was actually working on gay and lesbian subjects. It was all on the side or as part of a social scene. So. I kept two different parts of my life."

In her 1895 commencement address at Mount Carroll Seminary, Sawyer noted that "Increasing, broadening, quickening faculties does not despoil [a woman] of her pearls of truth. It does not lessen her love and courage not mar her ministrations with harshness. It does not make her less thoughtful for those nearest and dearest to her nor less capable and willing to be a helpmate or guiding spirit."

"Oh God. I'm the worst human being ever," Henking admitted.

She was talking about the day she came out to her family.

"My father died very suddenly," she recalled. "My mother went to work one day and, when she came back, he was dead. I really was flattened. I wasn't expecting it. I went home and I just didn't cope well. At a certain moment before the funeral, I said to my mother 'look my partner is coming and, just in case you don't get it, we're lesbians and you've got to make sure the rest of the family's OK.'"

"It was horrible timing," Henking acknowledged. "My mother was fine with my being a lesbian but she was upset that I thought it was more important than the fact that my father had died. I didn't. I just didn't want it to be awkward. I was so engaged in my own grief that I wasn't paying attention. I don't know...it's now almost 40 year later and...I don't know, if my partner died and someone couldn't see how traumatized I was...."

Her voice faltered.

Henking has since begun to look back upon the disastrous timing of her coming out with a sense of humor. Not everything can be intellectualized.

Henking's mother remained supportive until her death in 1985.

"I think twenty lesbians showed up at her funeral," she said. "It was oddly complicated for my cousins, aunts and uncles but perfectly wonderful for me and a great way of honoring my mom who...she was just terrific."

"My social and political world was mostly women," Henking added. "But I remember exactly where I was sitting when I first read a Los Angeles newspaper report about unusual pneumonia and cancers. My memory was everybody panicking and just being terrified that it was going to be the end of the world. I lived on the South Side in a primarily women's community and I wasn't as engaged in HIV as lots of other people I know from that period. I was more focused on housing and economic rights."

That changed when she met biochemist David Craig during a workshop in 1989 shortly after she began teaching at Hobart and William Smith Colleges in Geneva, New York.

"He was sat at my table and said that he wanted to do a course on AIDS," Henking said. "So, I started teaching this class with David and it was the probably most transformative teaching experience of my life. We were supposed to have 30 people and we got 100. It was difficult to teach but it forced me to learn how to teach not just subject matter but people. You struggle to find the best form of education. I was trying to teach people how to think about militancy and mourning together and trying to figure out a way to say 'of course militancy is completely appropriate in some circumstances and this is one of them.'"

Another of Henking's colleagues at Hobart and William Smith was professor of women's studies Betty Bayer. They have been partners for nearly 25 years.

In 1997, Henking co-edited *Que(e)rying Religion: A Critical Anthology* with Gary David Comstock—a fellow professor and author of works such as *Violence Against Lesbians and Gay Men*.

The groundbreaking examination of religion and sexuality coupled the history, traditions, theology, practice, culture and scriptures of an array of beliefs including Christianity, Buddhism, Judaism, Islam and Native American spirituality with authors across a spectrum lesbian, gay and queer studies.

"The contemporary world is dramatically concerned and conflicted about sexuality and religion," Henking and Comstock wrote in the book's introduction. "In this time of AIDS and of increasing fundamentalism across the globe, the questions raised by religious studies and lesbian/gay/queer studies are questions of survival."

That warning and the book which contains it have increased relevance even after two decades.

“A pattern in my life is that I eventually get to the topics that are bothering me,” Henking said. “It was a giant bibliographical search. We knew there was a lot of work out there that had to do with religion and sexual orientation but it was really scattered. I fell in love with trying to find this stuff. I had no idea how difficult it was going to be to find anything on contemporary Islam for example. It was a good way of pushing me to take seriously people who were incomprehensible to me. I was trying to learn about all these other people who were like me on some axes and profoundly not like me on others.”

“I’m surprised to say this but I think I learned to be less global about my evaluation of religion,” she added. “I tended to think of religious people as generally hostile and it helped me not to do that.”

The book led to Henking running a class on the subject. Teaching it was an endless series of equally profound discoveries for students and their professor.

“Some of the light and strength and inspiration and nobleness of the [lives] of Mrs. Shimer, her associates and assistants have entered into your lives,” Sawyer asserted in 1895. “You do not depart hence as you came.”

In 2012, Keohane and Shimer’s selection committee ended a nationwide hunt for the college’s 14th President in Henking’s classroom.

Her memories of each of the subsequent years she spent at Shimer flowed in almost uninterrupted thought.

“There’s a student who said to me one day ‘everybody at Shimer has a backstory’,” she recalled. “They are just the most amazing people I have ever met who made me think differently about the word ‘interesting.’ They live with their heads in books but they live full lives. They were really active in the Occupy Movement. When the Ferguson decision came out, a huge number of Shimer students were at the Chicago march. They would walk into my office all the time to borrow books or talk to me.”

“As a woman coming up in higher education, watching all your male colleagues get called ‘Professor’ while you get called ‘Mrs. Henking’ or ‘Susan’ was irritating,” she added. “But, at Shimer, everybody called everybody by their first name except for the African American students who called me ‘Ms. Susan’ or ‘Dr. Henking.’ It was an attempt to call everybody to a form of participatory, mature adulthood. Great Books can be very white and very male. Because of a colleague, James Bowers, we really diversified in race and ethnicity. It was a very gender fluid environment in some respects and the people...they work and they push back in a good way.”

She included a student who commented on a 2015 Windy City Times article authored by Ross Forman shortly after The Washington Monthly decided to crunch a few numbers on an Excel spreadsheet and name Shimer

“the worst college in America.”

In addition to the overall pride she maintained for her students, Henking told Forman about the “very visible” LGBT presence the college maintained including “a community of gender transitioning people [that] is quite active.”

The student who took umbrage with that statement claimed to have been misgendered by professors. She added that none of them were LGBT and noted “the institution refuses to print my correct name on my diploma, not because of any legal precedent but because ‘that’s how it’s been done’.”

“Did I deserve to be called out? Probably,” Henking acknowledged. “I would have preferred that the student came in and told me than putting it in the comments section of the Windy City Times but I was glad they spoke out.”

She added that the idea ranking institutions of higher education is “the stupidest ever.”

“Do they tell you anything about the quality of education? No,” she declared. “They basically tell you how many dollars-per-student there are. The formula is weighted in different ways. Shimer ended up as the worst college in America for graduating people of color and poor people. But this was comparing a sample of eight people to places with 8,000. You can’t evaluate the kind of education you get based on ranking systems or a lot of the data that is collected.”

It may have been an educational utopia, but the reality that Shimer could no longer sustain itself financially had sunk in long before The Washington Monthly offered salt for its wounds.

Henking helped spearhead the effort that would eventually lead to the agreement to merge Shimer with North Central College alongside Shimerians such as Dean Harold Stone and a team from North Central College including Assistant Vice President for External Affairs James Godo.

“I basically worked myself out of a job,” Henking said. “From the very beginning, a year and a half ago, North Central were clear that they were not looking to hire a second president. It’s painful because...”

Henking was no longer censoring herself.

From behind the veneer of the academic and all the years of questioning, discovery, teaching and arguments both dispassionate and fervent, an emotional center that unites humanity edged out in her broken voice.

“Because I really loved the place,” she said. “The students and the faculty renewed my belief in a higher education. They renewed my belief that you can have a better life if you’re willing to learn some things and do it together and do it despite the fact that you disagree with each other. They reminded me of the point of what I’d spent a career doing.”

Reflection was inevitable.

“I couldn’t raise enough money,” Henking said. “It was in too bad a shape when I arrived. Sometimes you just follow your ideals. Shimer was not just a job for me. It was a vocation. It was really meaningful to me to be able to spend five years at this tiny place that is incredibly intense, rewarding and heartbreaking. It’s been very hard for me. Part of running away from religion was running away from the requirement of self-sacrifice but that doesn’t mean you don’t choose it sometimes.”

It is still too early for Henking to make concrete plans concerning her future beyond returning to Geneva and the waiting arms of her partner.

Meanwhile, Conservative commentators continue to add academics to their growing list of enemies of an increasingly divided America.

“It’s the first time I haven’t had a job since I was 16,” she said. “I’m trying hard to think of it as liberating but I haven’t got there quite yet. I think in the United States, there’s a confusion between academics and intellectuals. We need critical, intelligent reflection together across agreements and disagreements about what it is we’re doing and what we aspire to do. It brings history and questioning to the table. Higher education is under threat in the United States. Getting a job and paying your bills can’t be it’s only point. Teaching, research and scholarship is part of a contribution to the public good.”

“Your Alma Mater will watch anxiously, lovingly, the line of light which marks your past,” Sawyer concluded her speech in 1895. “Think not, it makes no matter if your taper vanish. One spark extinguished leaves darkness in its place. Each new thought that you may awaken, each new aspiration you may enkindle, each new impulse for good, you may stimulate flashes back to her a thrill of joy and makes the fire on her altar burn more brightly.”

