



ALL IN THE *Family*

On the eve of Wendy Hopkins' '72 retirement, the Alumni Review takes a look at her 20 years in alumni relations at Williams.

By Kate Stone Lombardi '78
Photo by Bob Handelman

Consider a group of roughly 25,000 people, some well into their 90s, others barely beyond their teen years. They live all over the globe. They are involved in every professional field and personal pursuit imaginable. Their interests range from African dance to Ultimate Frisbee, from corporate mergers to home schooling.

One thing the members of this diverse, ever-expanding group do have in common is that they are alumni of Williams College. And for the past 20 years, Wendy Hopkins '72 has played an important role determining how best to keep them connected to each other and to their alma mater.

Hopkins will retire in March as director of Williams' Office of Alumni Relations and as secretary of the Society of Alumni. She first came to the Purple Valley as an exchange student from Connecticut College and decided to transfer, becoming one of the pioneering women in the early days of coeducation. After graduating with a major in art history, she returned to campus in 1980 to work in student housing. She joined the Office of Alumni Relations part time in 1986, rose through the ranks and became director in 1998.

Today she oversees a staff of 10 whose job is to figure out how to bring alumni together, whether through large-scale events such as homecoming and

reunion or smaller endeavors such as monthly dinner meetings for Los Angeles-area Ephs in the entertainment industry. The “how” can be literal, as in exploring and developing online tools to keep alumni in touch with each other. (When Hopkins started working in alumni relations, the Internet and e-mail weren’t even available to the general public. Now, Ephs can locate each other using a fully searchable Web directory, share information via e-mail lists and even find a ride to the airport with an online bulletin board—to name but a few features of the “Alumni Web Community.”)

The “how” can also mean creating—and, more often, helping alumni themselves create—new ways to connect based on what Ephs have in common. In addition to overseeing more than 70 classes and 75 regional associations, the alumni office supports social networks and programming for alumni of color, bisexual, gay, lesbian and transgendered alumni as well as for interest-based groups such as former rugby players or people working in K-12 education.

Volunteers are the backbone of most every endeavor, and Hopkins and her staff provide not only the training and assistance needed to bring their ideas to fruition but also recognition and support for their hard work. In this role Hopkins is well known to the roughly 1,600 alumni who volunteer for Williams in a non-fundraising capacity.

She has “touched the lives of literally thousands of Ephs,” says Richard Levy Jr. ’74, president of the Society of Alumni, which Hopkins serves as secretary.

Hopkins has “never stopped seeking ways to reach out to all alums,” adds Mary T. McTernan ’76, who was alumni society president from July 1998 to June 2000. “And she fought to reduce all kinds of barriers—physical, psychological and financial—which have prevented alums from full and active engagement with the College.”

This work has been carried out with the close counsel of a 20-member advisory group known as the Executive



This page: (top) Hopkins at a Bicentennial Medals dinner with her father, Wayne Wilkins ’41, and mother, Suki; and (bottom) at homecoming with Becky Logue-Conroy ’99, assistant director of alumni relations.

Opposite page: At the table with Executive Committee members Sarah Mollman Underhill ’80 and Dennis O’Shea ’77. Photos by Juan Baena ’07.

Committee of the Society of Alumni. In Hopkins’ role as its secretary, one that’s perhaps less familiar to the average Eph, she is “the glue that holds the organizational structure of the society together,” says Richard R. Pickard ’75, alumni society president from 2002 to 2004.

The Executive Committee’s membership is deliberately diverse, reflecting the demographics of the alumni body. Acting as the eyes and ears of their fellow Ephs, the group has brought forth a number of

issues and initiatives during Hopkins’ tenure, including increasing opportunities for continuing education and improving the alumni-student career mentor program.

“When the Executive Committee gets together, it is such an uplifting group of people,” Hopkins says. “They cross generations, and they are all passionate about

Williams. It is incredibly energizing to work with people like that.”

The nature of their conversations has reflected changes in the life of the College as well as changing times. In the early ’80s, when McTernan spent three years as a committee member, “One of the specific concerns was if and how the society might have to change to accommodate the growing number of women alums,” she says.

Communications and technology, too, have been Executive Committee fodder, often in the context of “how to actively engage young alumni and meet them where they live,” McTernan adds. One suggestion from the committee that ultimately came to pass was providing permanent e-mail forwarding addresses to graduating seniors.

Another issue was meeting alumni demand for more opportunities to engage with the College beyond the purely

social. The result: more and more faculty going “on tour” to lecture at regional events, most recently under the auspices of the traveling Williams Roadsolars program. “It’s a delight to see it coming to fruition,” says Robert Bahr ’67, who served as alumni society president from 2000 to 2002, when continuing education was high on the Executive Committee’s agenda.

Committee members have weighed the merits of a number of proposals with far-reaching effects, including creating *Williams People*, a new publication for Class Notes and other alumni news. Another plan they helped implement was moving the Bicentennial Medals ceremonies honoring alumni achievement from the spring to Convocation Weekend, so that more current students could participate—an idea Hopkins strongly endorsed.

“Recognizing the significant achievements of alumni at Convocation in front of the seniors is wonderful, because they can see some of the amazing accomplishments of our alumni,” she says. “It’s inspirational.”

Inclusiveness is at the fore of much of the Executive Committee’s work. A few years ago, the group worked to add a paragraph to the “vision” of the Society of Alumni, the introduction to its constitution. Now, the language recognizes that alumni “together represent the ages, nationalities, religious affiliations, sexual orientations, and abilities, talents and viewpoints of the global society Williams continues to serve.” The committee then tackled amendments to the constitution itself that were designed to update the document, streamline voting procedures and allow online voting for trustees and Tyng Bequest administrators, in large part to boost alumni participation in elections.

“Williams is perhaps a microcosm of society as a whole, which has become increasingly specialized and fragmented,” says Jill E. Stephens ’77, who was president of the society from 2004 to 2006. “The Society of Alumni has nurtured affinity groups under the Williams umbrella.”

Recent discussions have focused on

how to properly recognize and support the formal ways alumni give back—say, volunteering as a class or regional officer—as well as the informal, such as teaching a Winter Study course or serving as a career mentor to a student.

Of her work with volunteers, Hopkins says, “They bring their love of Williams to the table, and we have very constructive and progressive conversations. Ultimately, it’s working with other people who have as strong convictions about the value of their Williams educations as you do.”

“We refer to the Williams alumni body as the College’s ‘Second Endowment,’ because it is so important to the success and culture of Williams,” says current alumni society president

Levy, using a phrase coined by Stephen R. Birrell ’64, vice president for alumni relations and development and an alumni society VP. “That non-financial ‘endowment’ requires special, careful stewardship by the alumni professionals at Williams—and they are the best at what they do—and the alumni volunteers and leaders who are on the front lines of alumni relations on behalf of the College.”

Hopkins is at the table for all these discussions—in two decades she hasn’t missed a single one of the three Executive Committee meetings held each year. Levy describes her as an excellent listener who can get to the heart of a matter in a way that makes all interested parties feel invested in the outcome.

Stephens calls Hopkins calm, considerate and unflappable, with a huge store of institutional knowledge. She adds that Hopkins is a welcoming, reassuring presence for both the oldest alumni, who might be bewildered by the rate of change at the College, and the youngest, who are sometimes taken aback by how

slowly change seems to come.

“Wendy embodies the Williams of the 20th and 21st centuries,” Stephens says.

“I like to work with alumni one at a time,” Hopkins says. “The personal relationship is really important to me, and it’s inherently impossible with 25,000, but I try to have it with everyone I come into contact with, because I’m the face of the school to anyone I’m talking to.”

For her part, Hopkins is not locking in any post-retirement plans yet. One interest is buying and fixing up properties with her son Matt, 26, a partner in a timber framing company.

But first she wants to experience not working for a while—a



novelty for Hopkins—and to enjoy time with husband Peter ’74, sons Matt and Sam, daughter-in-law Jennifer and grandson William Porter Hopkins.

“Williams was absolutely instrumental in my life,” says Hopkins, whose father, E. Wayne Wilkins ’41, and brothers Clint ’68 and Wayne ’79 are Ephs, too. “The undergraduate experience was pivotal, but coming back to the College, reengaging and appreciating it in a much more holistic way, has been a huge part of my life. I’ve always felt like I was part of a family here.” ■

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