At reunion, alumnae relish a host of firsts

By Carter Smith

During the week that Louise Squitieri, Emily Saunders, Terri Bologna and the rest of the first four-year class graduated from Mercy College 50 years ago, the Beach Boys' "Help Me Rhonda" knocked "Drive My Car" by the Beatles from the top of the Billboard charts. Earlier in May of 1965, the first large-scale U.S. Army ground units had arrived in South Vietnam, and the Campbell Soup Co. introduced Spaghetti-Os to the American public under its Franco-American brand.

On Saturday, May 30, the three women, who were among the reunion committee's nine members, joined 15 other classmates for cocktails and dinner on the Mercy campus in Dobbs Ferry, followed by a brunch the next day at the DoubleTree Hilton in Tarrytown.

"It was a lot of fun and allowed us to reconnect and to see people have lived rich, full lives," Saunders, a Rye resident, told the Enterprise. "Yes, we have changed, but we are still 'Mercy Women,' and it shined."

According to Bologna, most members of the class, like her, lived in the Bronx and commuted to campus every day.

"We met by commuting," she said. "There was this Liberty [Lines] bus that would come up from the Cross County Shopping Center in Yonkers. We would wiggle our way up there one way or the other and then we'd be on this bus that cost all of a quarter, and it would drop us off in Dobbs Ferry."

"Many of the girls from the Bronx had almost a two-hour commute, one way," Squitieri added.

Founded by the Sisters of Mercy in 1950, Mercy College initially offered a program of religious training before becoming a four-year college offering baccalaureate degrees in 1961.

In the half century since, the college itself has undergone significant change, becoming independent, nonsectarian and coeducational in the 1970s, launching its first graduate and online degree programs in the 1980s, and in more recent years, doubling the size of its existing physical plant with the acquisition of Our Lady of Victory Academy next door and, most recently, embarking on the construction of a 350-bed dormitory.

Bronx native Squitieri majored in biology and minored in chemistry. Now living in Somers, she went on to teach at Irvington High School from 1966 to 1969. She left Irvington to earn a doctorate from the City University of New York, where she later went onto teach and to serve as a dean of undergraduate research.

"I really never thought I'd leave Irvington because I had such a wonderful teaching experience there, but I did want to get my doctorate," Squitieri said.

Saunders graduated from Mercy with a biology and chemistry double major. Her favorite teacher was Sr. Cornelius, the late Anne Rice, who taught biology. "She was smart, funny, supportive and a genuinely nice person," Saunders remembered.

Saunders went on to teach high school biology, chemistry and health education. She coordinated the Greenburgh District 7 health education program, was principal of the Cardinal McCloskey Emergency Residential School in Valhalla, and served as president of the Greenburgh Teachers Federation.

"I expected that I would teach high school [after graduating from Mercy], which was different from most women, who went to the elementary schools," Saunders said. "I never thought I would be an administrator, nor a principal. To be a union organizer and president was significantly different," she added.

Raised in the Bronx, Saunders fondly recalled the freedom the Mercy campus afforded her. "There were wonderful places to go 'in the country,' being a kid from New York City. I remember the special occasions, wearing academic attire, exploring new places. A brand-new library all to ourselves. Making friends from different neighborhoods and different places."

In many ways, Saunders believes her Mercy education helped shape who she is. "I was a trailblazer at Mercy," she said. "We were supported in being the first. Many of us were the first college graduates in the family, the first to have a career in the sciences. As a first-generation student, daughter of immigrant parents, I would like to thank Mercy College for their belief in all of us and their complete support of our academic
growth. I salute the Sisters of Mercy.”

Although her mother attended a two-year normal school for teaching, Bologna and her siblings were the first generation in her family to attend a four-year college. “In the family it was expected,” she said. “You just had to figure out how to pay for it!” To do that, Bologna worked in a local supermarket.

“When we weren’t in class, and we weren’t commuting, we were working,” Squitieri confirmed.

Bologna, now an Old Greenwich, Conn., resident, said that expectations were far different for women than they are today. “Because of the times it was true, but I knew for myself — and I feel comfortable saying it was true for a large number of us in the class — yes, we saw ourselves as being married and having families, but we also saw ourselves as having some kind of career. Out of this group, considering there were so few of us, there are a large number of people with professional degrees.”

Bologna also stressed that she and her classmates worked very hard at their studies. “We were all on scholarships, so we needed to live up to that.”

Asked if she had any advice for today’s Mercy students, Saunders responded, “Work hard. You can achieve your dreams. If it is out there and you want it, work for it. Aim high, fall gently and get up.”

Bologna, who majored in biology and psychology, has had what she called “a varied career.” After graduation, she went to Fordham for a master’s degree in social work, and then held jobs in that field for a number of years.

“My goal was always to work with young kids with disabilities, and in social work, I’d just get channeled a different way,” she said. “I guess about 10 years after I got my master’s, I started to work in schools. I finally ended up with a doctorate in special ed. My focus has been working with very young kids — birth to about 5 years old — with disabilities.”

Bologna worked for the Stamford, Conn., school system for about five years, followed by positions at several New York City schools, as well as at Fordham University and NYU, among other employers.

Looking back at her years at Mercy, Bologna said, “To me, the most meaningful piece of it was the sense of community we all had there. First of all, our class was a small group, so it was easier to develop a sense of community. It was the same with the faculty.”

In her case, the teacher Bologna most connected with was psychology professor Adma d’Heurle. “I talked to her about four or five years ago to see if she’d come to one of the reunions. She was 80-something at that point, and said, ‘I don’t think I’ll be able to make it!’”
Eileen Yearwood Waite and Alice McAuliffe Callahan socialize in front of a slideshow being projected on a screen.