# Introduction

"If you want to see a picture of social change during the latter part of the twentieth century, follow the lives of the class of 1962. Raised during the prosperity following World War Two, entering college at the peak of the Baby Boom, nurtured on the ideal of the nuclear family with Mom in the kitchen and Dad bringing home the bacon, we have been at the cutting edge of a revolution in the role of women."

[*Bryn Mawr Class of '62—25th Reunion Survey Report*, by Elizabeth Gould]

**"It's Good To Be A Woman"** traces a small number of particular and representative lives, women from the Bryn Mawr College class of '62. These are not celebrities; they are ordinary people in extraordinary times, women who have led productive and successful lives, but not necessarily on a grand scale. In 1962 (a year before the publication of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique)*, most college-educated women still expected their lives to revolve around marriage and family. But these women had larger ambitions. Bryn Mawr had gave them the support of a kind of old-school feminism, the idea that women are capable, that it's good to be a woman. They were determined to have lives of their own, to find meaningful work, to make a difference. The question they all ask, again and again, is: "Who am I and what do I want to do with my life?" In a world in flux, each woman had to create her own particular path through life, to find her own way. We follow these stubborn, can-do optimists as they navigate the turbulence of the sixties and early seventies, confront crisis (divorce, sickness, getting fired), and build lives and careers, charting new territory for women in the professions.

As a group, these women are important because they were in the vanguard of a feminist movement breaking down barriers for women entering the professions. By following their lives, **"It's Good To Be A Woman"** fills in a missing piece in the history of the women's movement. Finally, it was these women, and others of their generation, who turned out to be the wave of the future. The absence of well-defined career tracks, the need to be creative in seizing opportunities, the problem of balancing work and family—these are now true for all educated women, and even some men.

In 1987, I went back to Bryn Mawr for my 25th class reunion, curious to know what had become of my classmates. I discovered that at least a few had succeeded in traditionally male professions, often as "the first woman" to reach the highest levels—the first woman to make partner in a big New York law firm, the first woman brain surgeon and professor of neurosurgery at Stanford University medical school. Others were still searching, trying various lines of work, not yet satisfied that they had found their real vocation. By that time in my life, I had gone through marriage, divorce, and a rather episodic career in college administration. In conversations with classmates, I discovered that I was not alone. Many of us were divorced; and most had moved around a lot, from job to job, not necessarily by choice. I talked with classmates about career setbacks, about getting fired, stopping to have children, balancing work and family. While many of the conversations were about failure, there was always an undercurrent of optimism. We talked about what we had learned from failure, about different definitions of success, about the meaning of our lives so far.

I heard so many stories. I met, or reconnected with, so many vibrant, interesting women. And I felt, even back in 1987, that what I was hearing was more than a collection of individual stories, however compelling, that there was something intriguing and important about these women as a group. Those reunion conversations stayed in my mind, along with a lot of questions, even as my own life took a new direction. I began working in oral history, spent time in Morocco, and wrote my first book, on Moroccan women (*Voices of Resistance*, SUNY Press, 1998). Ten years passed before I came back to the subject of Bryn Mawr's class of '62.

As a member of the class, I have had unusual access. More than fifty classmates generously shared their life stories with me in tape-recorded interviews, not interviews really, more like conversations. Over half the class responded to a 40th reunion questionnaire. More than half (not necessarily the same people) responded to my requests for information, sending papers, clippings, photos, notes, letters and e-mail. I consulted a wide variety of historical sources, as well as materials from the college archives and personal collections.

In the course of five or six years of talking with classmates, I found lots of interesting stories, compelling personalities. I was thrown off, at first, by the low-key, self-deprecating tone taken by these very accomplished women. When I suggested that they had come out of Bryn Mawr full of confidence, several said, "No, not really." Classmates talked about times when they might have given up, when it all might have gone another way. Many talked about being "lucky" in their lives and careers. I began to realize how brave these women were, how strong, to go ahead in spite of real barriers (sex discrimination was perfectly legal before the 1964 Civil Rights Act) and even self-doubt. They showed remarkable resilience, and never an ounce of self-pity, even when times were tough.

A theme began to emerge. I realized that we were the spearhead of a mass movement of women going into the professions. And I realized that we were ideally positioned to be that fighting wedge, precisely because we were privileged—economically, socially and in our education. We could not have stayed out there in front without having a certain level of economic privilege and a core of inner confidence. When we graduated from Bryn Mawr, professional positions and career ladders were not there for women. We had to be able to try out different things, to take time, to dither around a bit, to take risks. You have to be strong to break down walls, and these Bryn Mawr graduates had the sort of stubborn optimism, even arrogance, that was essential. They didn't give up.

The 192 girls who entered Bryn Mawr as freshmen in the fall of 1958 were not typical of their generation. Almost half the class came from private schools, at a time when the vast majority of Americans went to public school. Three quarters of the class identified their mothers as "homemakers," at a time when women held more than a third of jobs in the United States. This was clearly a group that came from economic privilege. Even girls from more or less modest home circumstances were privileged just by being at Bryn Mawr. As a group, these women had choices and opportunities that were not the norm for most American women coming of age in the early sixties.

Most of the girls who went to Bryn Mawr could just as easily have ended up at one of the other "seven sisters" women's colleges. But the fact that they went to Bryn Mawr made a difference. Not only was Bryn Mawr the most self-consciously academic of the women's colleges; it also had a strong feminist tradition. The College expected its graduates to go on and do something serious in the world, and that was different from other women's colleges at the time.

Born in the war years, we attended college right on the cusp between the conservative fifties and the explosive sixties. We came of age with Martin Luther King, Jr. and the civil rights movement, President Kennedy and the New Frontier. These were heady times, with an extraordinary sense of possibility. “I wanted to save the world,” said one classmate, a journalist. “I thought you could do that.” The message we got from Bryn Mawr was one of can-do optimism mixed with a strong sense of responsibility. Knowing that we were privileged, we were determined to do something with our lives, to make a contribution.

To be a vanguard, it is not enough to break down barriers. You have to have someone, indeed large numbers of people, who will follow in your footsteps. Most of us were born in 1940, just six years before the start of the postwar baby-boom. That meant that after our generation had broken down the walls, several waves of women from the baby boom were there ready to surge through the breach. The baby-boomers have always dominated the conversation, through sheer force of numbers, ever since they grew up to become the 60s generation, defined by their opposition to the Vietnam War. Meanwhile, the class of ‘62 has gone through life more quietly, always just one step ahead, part of a little-known “in-between” generation, neither hippies nor housewives, difficult to define, more reticent than the boomers who followed, less angry, more confused, perhaps more thoughtful.

Very few of the narratives in **“It’s Good To Be A Woman”** deal with someone who found both love and vocation early on. Most have a real searching in these two vital areas. And while these women were pioneers in trying to do serious work and have a family, they were also probably the last generation of women who followed their husbands’ career moves, without any discussion or debate. A lot of classmates told of being uprooted, their professional lives interrupted, not just once but again and again. This has made their lives rather quirky and episodic, but also more interesting.

It is the right time for such a book. More than forty years out of Bryn Mawr, we can see the full arc of these women’s lives. Several classmates told me they had already been thinking along the same lines, cleaning out parents’ attics, getting ready to write their own memoirs, looking back to try to understand themselves in relation to the times, musing on roads not taken, the “what-ifs,” and looking forward to the next chapter.