

Tobin influences generations of UW students

By DEBRA BAKER BECK, ALUMNEWS Editor

For the thousands of students influenced by Peg Tobin (BS '42, ME '62), her selection as 1997 Medallion Service Award recipient is perfectly obvious and perhaps overdue.

Her ever-present leadership and shoulder to lean on — even her gentle insistence that Spurs, Chimes and Mortar Board members learn the "Alma Mater" — left an impact on many of us that we feel even today.

Still, getting Tobin to talk about her 21 years of service in the UW Dean of Students Office took some effort. "Why me?" dominated the early stages of our interview. Peg doesn't think she deserves an award as prestigious as the MSA, even though anyone who knows her would disagree with that assessment.

One can, however, get her to talk about her beloved Pi Beta Phi sorority and about the student leaders she advised in the UW class honoraries. Of the former, Tobin says the ties go back to her own collegiate days, when she forged lifelong friendships with her Pi Phi sisters.

"We had a real, strong feeling of loyalty," Tobin says of her sorority. "You get a real feeling of closeness in a sorority, closeness to one another." Evidence of that fact is the friendships she maintains today, with women such as Pat Sullivan Larson, Elinor Hitchcock Mullens and Joanne Clark Carr.

Today's women of Pi Beta Phi have Tobin to thank for the massive expansion that doubled its rooming capacity in the early 1990s. As dean of women, Tobin noted that the Pi Phi house was the smallest on the row and recommended that the sorority expand its facility. But no one stepped up to assume responsibility; so when Tobin retired, she took on the job. Peg recruited Elinor Mullens' husband, Glenn, to work with the project architect and eventually convinced Elinor to join them. When the hole was dug, "I knew we were committed." Today, Pi Phi has room for 30 more women than it did before, thanks to Peggy Tobin's leadership.

"I still feel an obligation to see that Pi Phi succeeds and continues," Tobin says. Sorority members from the day she entered UW in 1938 have all felt her influence in some way or another.

So have thousands of Spurs, Chimes and Mortar Board members, all of whom benefited from Tobin's guidance as the organizations' adviser.

"I hoped to promote leadership and service...without leadership and without service, they wouldn't be an all-around person," she explains of her goals as adviser.

Tobin acknowledges that she was an ever-present force with these groups, perhaps being a little more involved than she should have been.

"I knew I should be less direct," she says of her advisory role, "but I was quite direct. You're supposed to sit back and let them make their mistakes, but I wanted to prevent them from making the mistakes in the first place."

Tobin developed lifelong relationships with many UW student leaders over the years.

"You build a friendship with those students," she says. "They are my friends, and they would come to my rescue. We went through a lot — we had good times, we had bad times, we had hard times. But we succeeded."

Tobin drew great satisfaction from watching students mature, from the day they entered as freshmen to the day they graduated.



Margaret "Peg" Tobin

"It was just beautiful to see the growth," she says of the student leaders she met. "I enjoyed that."

Tobin knew the "cream of the crop" in her work as associate dean of students, but she also encountered students who struggled. Fortunately, she says only 1 percent of all the cases she handled really were problem students. For the most part, Tobin simply helped individuals sort out their situations and helped ease the way for them whenever possible.

"I cut red tape for a lot of kids," she says, joking that former Registrar Bernie Linenberger cringed whenever he saw her coming to plead the next "really special" case.

"Rules are made, but they can be broken."

Tobin's 21 years at UW covered a colorful and sometimes difficult period in society. She was there during the turbulent 60s, when the campus experienced tremendous changes.

For example, when Tobin arrived on campus in 1964, women students had a dress code (no slacks without prior permission from the Dean of Students Office), dorm hours, sign-in and sign-out after 7 p.m. and restrictions prohibiting them from leaving campus for the weekend (again, without permission). Those all changed during Tobin's tenure, as society opened up and mores changed.

The 1960s also brought significant unrest on campuses across the country. Wyoming experienced its share of friction, but nothing resembling the turbulence found elsewhere.

"We were so insulated from all that that it took three or four years before our student body started to get a little restless," Tobin says, adding that greater access to television might have altered the level of UW student activism.

The Kent State conflict did affect UW, though. Tobin recalls students storming Old Main, demand-

ing that the flag be flown overnight. When the administration granted permission, Peg decided she should be with the students and went to the flag pole to observe the protest. Students and National Guard soldiers mixed; some of them carried guns. When a police officer recognized Tobin in the crowd, he insisted she leave. But she refused, opting instead to stay with the students she knew and trusted.

Tobin's job regularly placed her in the middle of conflicts between administrators and students. She called herself an "ombudsman" at times, acting as a liaison between the two groups. Tobin feared talking to no one; she regularly mixed with students, faculty and administrators.

A Wyoming native, Tobin never strayed far from her home state. After graduating from Midwest High School in Natrona County, Peg enrolled at Mundelein College, a Catholic women's school in Chicago. Tobin lasted only a year there, before she felt the need to return to Wyoming. She completed her undergraduate work at UW, graduating in 1942 with a bachelor's degree in business education.

She left Laramie periodically, to teach high school business courses in Casper, work as a secretary in Casper and Denver, serve as assistant dean at Loretto Heights College in Denver and to work for then Sen. Clifford P. Hansen in Washington, D.C., for a year in 1978. But Tobin always came back. She recalls thinking, "I'm home," whenever she crossed the border into Wyoming — still does, as a matter of fact.

Tobin's UW service began in 1964, when she took the position as dean of women upon the retirement of Luella Galliver. Her title changed to associate dean of students in 1970, and she advised more than 200 students per month for 21 years.

Tobin credits her parents, Irish immigrants who ranched in Natrona County, for instilling a love for Wyoming and an appreciation for the value of education. She tells the story of her father admonishing an acquaintance who suggested his eldest daughter didn't need a college education, since "she'll just be a housewife." Peter Tobin abruptly informed this individual that his daughters would have the same educational opportunities as his sons, even though money was tight.

Biographical Information

Peg Tobin was the first chair of the Wyoming Governor's Commission on the Status of Women, an organization that recognized her service with an award in 1992. She was Zonta woman of the year in 1985 and a UW Student Affairs Professional Award recipient for "outstanding contributions to student life." She also has earned the National Outstanding Spur Adviser Award; Mortar Board Service Citation; Mortar Board Faculty Woman of the Year Award; a special citation from the National Association for Women Deans, Administrators and Counselors; and UW Panhellenic Council Outstanding Chapter Adviser Award.

She established two scholarships to recognize and reward students. The Margaret C. Tobin Panhellenic Scholarship and the Peter Tobin Award. The Tobin family was honored as 1996 UW family of the year.

Tobin is active with St. Paul's Newman Center, the UW Alumni Association (served on the board from 1992-96), and other civic organizations.