Nancy E. Gwinn
Distinguished Alumni

by Julianne Couch
Alumni News Editor

From her office in the National Museum of Natural History at the Smithsonian Institution, overlooking presidential motorcades on Constitution Avenue and marches on the U.S. Capitol Building, Nancy E. Gwinn (B.A., ’67 English) is a long way from her Sheridan, Wyo., origins. But in spite of being surrounded by political power and national history, Gwinn knows her adopted city does not compete with Wyoming and the national forests there.

"When a person comes to mountains. It is crowded and a very different experience. I have to come back West to regenerate my spirit." Gwinn travels to Sheridan to visit her mother, the former Elizabeth Waddle (B.A., ’38, Spanish) and to visit old friends. She enjoys travel to other locales too, but is kept busy by her position as director of the Smithsonian Institution Libraries, a 20-branch system with facilities in Washington, D.C., Maryland, New York City and the Republic of Panama. She joined the Smithsonian in 1984 as assistant director for collections management, a position she held until 1997, when she was named director of the Smithsonian Institution Libraries (SIL) in 1997.

Her accomplishments in this position include establishing an information systems division to work closely with the Smithsonian's office of technology. She selected and implemented a new integrated library system, and installed an imaging center so staff could learn about digitizing technology. In 2001 Gwinn launched a web site for the public called SIL's Galaxy of Knowledge, which now garners over 2 million hits per month. This operation has repositioned the Institution's Libraries' multi-million dollar collection of rare books and other collections, online exhibitions, resource guides and other materials. Gwinn has a broad scope of responsibility to the Smithsonian's 20 libraries and its central support offices. "We really have a footprint in every single one of those places. We have a broad scope of responsibility to support the Institution's research and educational programs, with concentrations in science and technology, arts and American history." With all she has accomplished in her distinguished career, it would be no wonder if her undergraduate days were a bit hazy to her memory. However, she readily recalls her days playing flute in the marching band, and touring to the Sun Bowl in El Paso for a half-time performance during the Cowboy's appearance there. "Charles Seelenrich, the band director, was really terrific and I enjoyed my band experience very much. I still remember my position in the loop of the script W-Y-O, which we did at every game. It was really exciting to be part of a nationally televised bowl game." Her flute performance also earned her a spot on the annual Wyo Days tour, playing at high schools all over the state.

Gwinn also recalls her days with Delta Delta Delta sorority, SPURS, Chimes, and Mortar Board. She was also president of what is today the Student Activities Council, which planned events taking place in the Union, such as Casino night. In 1966 she was selected to represent Wyoming and took sixth place in the annual College Queen contest, which was held in New York City. "It was my first trip east. One of the sponsors was General Motors, so among other things, we competed in a driving contest, earning a trophy. I was really proud of that." Wyoming most likely helped her place fourth when she visited UW this fall.

George Washington University, so she’d do it right." Of course, the idea for the project changed completely over those years, and now garners over 2 million hits per month. This operation has repositioned the Institution's Libraries' multi-million dollar collection of rare books and other collections, online exhibitions, resource guides and other materials. Gwinn has a broad scope of responsibility to the Smithsonian's 20 libraries and its central support offices. "We really have a footprint in every single one of those places. We have a broad scope of responsibility to support the Institution's research and educational programs, with concentrations in science and technology, arts and American history." With all she has accomplished in her distinguished career, it would be no wonder if her undergraduate days were a bit hazy to her memory. However, she readily recalls her days playing flute in the marching band, and touring to the Sun Bowl in El Paso for a half-time performance during the Cowboy's appearance there. "Charles Seelenrich, the band director, was really terrific and I enjoyed my band experience very much. I still remember my position in the loop of the script W-Y-O, which we did at every game. It was really exciting to be part of a nationally televised bowl game." Her flute performance also earned her a spot on the annual Wyo Days tour, playing at high schools all over the state.

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Instead she'll be busy participating in all the Homecoming activities, and being among a group of other distinguished alumni from Wyoming. "Wyoming breeds a lot of independent people who are very successful," she acknowledges. "Let's say it's from the water."

Regardless of the cause of Gwinn's success, her friend Hoke MacMillan of Laramie (B.S., ’67, J.D., ’70) supported her award nomination with these words: "As I think back and reflect upon my life, I remember people I knew were going to make society a better place, and to me Nancy was one of them. She was a great contributor, did things, got things done, and was reliable in every sense of the word."

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