

# Mary Ellen Smyth

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**M**ary Ellen Smyth came of age in the 1950s, which she calls a dreadful time: "It was a very boring decade," Smyth says. "It was between Frank Sinatra and Elvis, so there was no good music, and there were no magazines devoted to us. It's a wonder some of us managed to do anything!"

Her mother – Smyth calls her "a phenomenal woman for her time" – was supporting the family by working as a waitress after Smyth's father died. They moved from Thermopolis to Laramie, and she worked in the Diamond Horseshoe restaurant, which was about a mile out of town toward



Mary Ellen Smyth (BA '56, MA '60)

Rawlins, until she died at the age of 50. "She was an orphan, raised in an orphanage," Smyth says. As a high school sophomore, she was farmed out by the orphanage to take care of children. She dropped out of school after her sophomore year."

But she made sure her children went to college. "She always talked about education as the great sav-

ior," Smyth says. "College education was the secret to doing better than she did."

Smyth excelled in school and was valedictorian of her high school class; she was offered several scholarships to UW, where she double-majored in English and speech and theater (they were one department at that time). Smyth became a Pi Phi, and made most of her good friends there.

After graduation, she taught in Denver high schools before returning to UW to earn a master's degree in theater. At that point, she was planning to marry another former UW student, Pat Smyth, who was in the service and was going to be a doctor. The master's degree was part of a plan to get a better teaching position while he went to medical school. Instead, the couple broke up. He went to medical school at Northwestern University, and she got a teaching job at Penn State University.

She found she enjoyed teaching college students and stayed at Penn State for more than three years. "I  
*continued on page 6*

## Mary Ellen Smyth

*continued from page 5*

wish I had gone straight for a Ph.D.," she says. "I'm not sure I would have had a career as a professor, but having that degree opens so many doors."

Still, the time at Penn State "opened my eyes to the big world out there. I finally got to New York, which was my dream because I loved theater. I came close to trying to become an actress there. But that was a hard thing for a girl from Wyoming to do — I was a product of my times."

She realized that without a doctorate she wasn't going to get much further in academia. "The students were getting younger and younger, and I was there and single," she says. "I thought I was ready to move on." She landed a job overseas as a director of entertainment at a military base, but before she left, she learned that her mother had developed leukemia, so she came back to Laramie and scrambled to get a teaching job at UW. Her former boyfriend, Pat Smyth, had finished medical school by that time; they got back together and decided to get married. After her mother died, the couple moved to Chicago, where he worked as an orthopedic surgeon, she as a high

school teacher of English and speech.

When the Smyths adopted twin boys, she stopped teaching and did not return, which suited her fine. But after she spent a few years at home with the boys, her husband decided to start his own practice. "He pressed me into service to run the place," she says. "I didn't know a thing, but boy, did I learn fast." His practice was one of the biggest solo practices in the country, and Smyth started out on a new career as a medical practice manager.

This was their life until 1980, when one of her sons died suddenly. Three years later, her husband died. "The 80s were a blur to me," Smyth says. "My son and I were left pretty much clinging to each other. But you learn to cope. The sun comes up and life goes on. It was an incredible learning experience — about myself and about people, their shortcomings and their capacity for love and compassion. There has to be some good that comes out of something like that."

She sold her husband's practice and decided to start her own business. Her experience had taught her enough that she felt able to offer herself as a consultant for other doctors, calling her business The Smyth Organization. She found plenty of takers and enjoyed

being her own boss, but she has since let that part of her business go. The health care world started to become very uncertain when Hilary Clinton was working on a new health care plan and planning for physicians' futures became difficult.

At the same time, Smyth began to do more of what she had been doing so much of as a volunteer: offering her services as a speaker and a trainer. Now Smyth is excited about embarking on a speaking career. "One of my passions now is women and philanthropy," she says. "How can they be good philanthropists? That's what I really want to talk about."

In her training work, she helps boards of all kinds to organize and devise strategic plans. Smyth calls this her third career, and part of it grew out of her involvement with the American Association of University Women (AAUW), the largest organization of its kind in the world.

She had joined AAUW to meet some people in her community when she and her husband first moved to Chicago. She felt strongly about its mission of fostering education for women and girls; she got more and more involved and the AAUW became one of her great loves. She served as a national pres-

ident from 2001-2005.

Smyth has also worked over the years with the UW Alumni Association, hosting gatherings in Chicago, even recruiting student athletes with her husband. She stayed involved with the UW Foundation in its fundraising efforts, serving on the last national capital campaign committee, which raised money to build the Centennial Complex and the Art Museum.

Underlying all her endeavors has been a strong sense of community service, but the paths her life has taken have been something of a surprise to her. "It is a little crazy and you wonder how it all comes together," she says. "But I was blessed with a good education, provided by UW, and the vision to continue learning, exploring, growing. I think that's the better part of what education provides — the sense that four years is not the end but just the beginning. Once you 'learn how to learn,' the world opens up. It certainly did for this girl from Thermopolis.

"For many of us from small towns across the country, and certainly from the 1950s, those education years marked a beginning of wonderful things to come. Dr. Seuss said it best — 'Oh, the places you'll go.'"