

SIGNATURE

by Martha Nikitas Stone '86

A Matter of Degrees

One of the great things about not having an advanced degree is that, when you're changing the third diaper in as many hours, you never have to say to yourself, "Three years of law school for *this*?" or "Will my MBA still be relevant when the children are finally in school?" Even with all the rights, honors and privileges appertaining to a bachelor's degree from Williams College, the stay-at-home mom can lose perspective now and then. OK, daily.

In fall 2001, in an effort to alter my perspective, I accepted an invitation to represent Williams at the inauguration of Sanford Ungar, president of Goucher College in Maryland. When President Morty Schapiro's office called to ask me to serve as the Williams delegate, I didn't even consider how many others had been asked and declined—I was going!

One of Morty's staff called with a few questions: height and hat size, parking and guest pass requirements, proper spelling of my name for the program (all standard fare). "Any graduate degrees?" she asked. "No, just my B.A." She paused and reassured, "Oh. That's OK." (Ouch.)

The academic costume arrived by UPS two weeks before the event. I tested the gown for size and feel, hung it in a closet and forgot about the whole thing until inauguration day arrived. I picked up the carpool, left my kids with a friend, threw the cap and gown in the trunk and flew up York Road.

At the appointed hour, the delegates—two other 30-somethings, several older alumni from other institutions and plenty of professors and college presidents—gathered and exchanged greetings. This was a truly colorful and exciting pageant. I struck up a conversation with the delegate from Sweet Briar College. After the usual chatter, she asked, "In what field is your doctorate?" "I don't have a doctorate," I replied. She

looked puzzled. "But your tassel is gold; I, well, I just assumed." I could have said my thesis was on the alternative use of four-color and black-and-white imagery throughout Margaret Wise Brown's signature work, *Good Night Moon*. Instead I led with, "This costume was sent to me by the College—I took it out and put it on." I was astonished that the little gold braid dangling at the corner of my eye was all that cloaked my status as B.A. and M.O.M.

At last we were asked to assemble, oldest institutions at the head of the academic procession. It was indeed an honor and privilege to stand so near the front of the line and not simply for the guarantee of orchestra seating. I stood proudly draped in my purple hood, musing that this grand costume masked the dried milk on the right shoulder of my suit.

Perhaps I just haven't been listening, but trumpets never seem to play when I walk into a room. At hearing the brass ensemble as we entered the hall, I knew that this was to be a grand and solemn occasion. I drank in the invocations, anthems and amens, colors and costumes, speeches by governors, senators and college presidents, and finally, the requisite inaugural address.

Reveling in this feast of thoughts and ideas, I began to recall the life of the mind, at least in the abstract. Then I prayed that in my case there would be an *afterlife* of the mind, waiting just around the bend. This exhilarating day reminded me of the festival of learning that is a Williams education. Its intrinsic value is in helping one to live fully and intentionally, whether as prelude to graduate work or to other life journeys.

After the benediction, I offered greetings and congratulations to President Ungar from the entire Williams community and moved on in search of my car. I convinced myself that the wind had picked up and that I should keep the robe on—for warmth.

When I arrived to collect my children, my 5-year-old, Sarah, said, "You look pretty in your robes, Mommy." As I hoisted 15-month-old William onto one hip, he registered his approval by running his hand back and forth along the three soft, black velvet stripes on the sleeve. I floated along wrapped and rapt in the folds of my flowing gown, still elevated by the events of the afternoon. The kids climbed into the car, and I answered Sarah's questions about the inauguration as we wended our way through the neighborhood and turned onto our circle.

Our UPS man, Kevin, was sitting in his truck near our house. As soon as I turned into our driveway, he jumped out and followed me into the garage, waving a call tag. "Mrs. Stone," he said, "I have a 'pick up' for you, but I didn't see any packages outside your door." "I am not shipping anything today, Kevin," I said. "What's the tag say?" He squinted at the tiny printout: "E.R. Moore Co.? Says here 'cap and gown'?"

I should have been grateful that E.R. Moore hadn't instructed Kevin to wait at the Goucher gates to retrieve its property before the brass quintet had put their horns away. Instead, with my UPS man and two small children as witnesses to my swift decline and fall, I grudgingly unhooked my hood and handed over the mortarboard and tassel. I laughed out loud as Kevin tossed my erstwhile PhD into the back of his big brown truck and lurched off down the street.

As I stooped to pick up William, buckle him into his high chair and hand him a teething biscuit, I regained perspective. Then I sat down with Sarah and asked her what she liked best about her day at school.

With her children now in school, Martha Nikitas Stone '86 of Baltimore, Md., has returned to her marketing practice.