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Pomp and (tumultuous) circumstance



JONATHAN WIGGS/GLOBE STAFF

Joanne Quinn Moffatt, an Emmanuel College senior in 1970, and a classmate wrote a letter to current students.

Events, 50 years apart, upend senior rituals for Emmanuel College students

By Thomas Farragher
GLOBE STAFF

The letter is a time capsule of sorts.

It was written with knowledge now a half-century old, and, yet, somehow still fresh across the decades.

It was authored by women — once college seniors — whose commencement ceremony, one of life's milestone moments, was upended by mortal current events — by a

death toll tallied here and abroad.

They flashed peace signs then. Their bell-bottom jeans were the ubiquitous uniform of a generation.

And now, bonded by a common connection to Emmanuel College, members of the class of 1970 are offering words of consolation and hope — of optimism and resilience — to members of the class of 2020 whose own commencement will surely be one unlike any other.

They know all about dramatically reshaped ceremonies. Like the one they lived through 50 years ago. The one without much pomp, with too much circumstance.

Today, it is a viral disease that has ricocheted around the world, upending life everywhere, including here in College Town

USA, where campuses now confront a commencement season amid sickness and fear.

And so the class of 1970 — forged by tectonic events that are now the stuff of grainy news footage — has some words, paragraphs of advice and solace, for the class of 2020.

“What we encountered in May of 1970, 50 years ago, impacted our final days at Emmanuel, as well,” the letter, sent a few days ago, reads. “Like you, special events and activities we were looking forward to in our final semester were altered as students across the country went on strike to protest the shootings at Kent State University.

“This was a very divided time in American history as the country seemed to be

coming apart over the Vietnam War. We, too, had our classes cancelled and a non-traditional commencement, as a result. We, too, experienced many of the emotions you are probably feeling these days.”

The letter is signed by Jane Candito Corr, who in 1970 was her class president, and Joanne Quinn Moffatt, then the president of Emmanuel’s student government.

They left the campus that they fell in love with 50 years ago — an era of rigidly enforced curfews and mandatory chapel services — and went on to build careers and families of their own.

Corr, 70, taught elementary school in Roxbury and Dorchester. The mother of two and grandmother of five retired 13 year ago. She now lives in Kingston and is a member of Emmanuel’s alumni board of directors.

Moffatt, also 70, was a sociology major whose career propelled her to the head of human resources offices for private and publicly held companies.

They love Emmanuel. Their hearts break for this year’s seniors. The events of these dismal days somehow make those college-day bonds stronger, more urgent, more necessary. There’s a kinship there.

There was no parade of graduates across a stage in 1970. Jane Corr accepted the diplomas on behalf of all of her classmates.

“People were shocked that something like that would happen,” she said, referring to the May 4, 1970, shootings at the university in Kent, Ohio, when National Guard troops killed four students and wounded nine others during a campus antiwar protest. “We protested. Students went on strike.”

Moffatt recalls marching on Boston Common with students from other Boston colleges and how her classmate collected the degrees for everyone.

“We removed our mortar boards and tucked them under our arms,” Moffatt told me. “It was difficult. We thought there should be some ceremony and it should reflect what we espoused as students.”

And now, across all these years, it’s difficult again.

Once again there are college seniors in the Fenway galvanized by global events that are reshaping the punctuation point to college careers.

Patrick Carty, a political science major and native of Maine, is the secretary of this year’s graduating class. He was drawn to Emmanuel because of its close-knit campus that felt like a real community.

Turns out, he said, that’s exactly what it is.

“I think that’s rarer and rarer to find,” he told me. “But that’s something Emmanuel still has.”

Carty had an internship on Beacon Hill, working in a corner of the state government’s executive branch, until COVID-19 became part of our daily lexicon. That internship is over. So are formal classes on campus. He’s studying online now.

“Every now and then, I get angry,” Carty said. “We kind of lost our senior year. But I have to remind myself that we’re not alone.”

In that boat sits Carty’s classmate, Giuliana Sannella, who is studying mass communication and writing — editing and publishing — and works as an intern at WHDH-TV. She’s from Stoneham and fell in love with Emmanuel during her first campus tour.

Now, she’s reaching across the years to the class of 1970, remembering two words of advice that members of that class have sent to hers: “Have heart.”

Sister Janet Eisner, Emmanuel’s president, was the director of admissions at the school in 1970. She remembers the days of teach-ins, and that truncated com-

mencement — that abbreviated ceremony that was going to be made whole in two months when the class of 1970 was being invited back for its 50th reunion.

“They asked me if they could come back,” Sister Janet said of what was supposed to be this year’s special commencement. “They didn’t have a real ceremony back then and they asked if we could give them all diplomas and I said, ‘Of course. We could do it at commencement.’”

Except now, that won’t happen. Perhaps a ceremony later this year will be announced.

“The students are sad,” Sister Janet said. “And so are we.”

Students have moved out. Parents collected them. There were tearful sidewalk farewells.

“This is something totally out of our control,” Emmanuel’s president said. “In my whole time here, I’ve never experienced anything that’s come as a wave like this has. It’s taken everything we have to keep us together.”

But somehow that has happened.

“I’m super hopeful,” Giuliana Sannella said. “I have no doubt that, as a class — as a society — we’re going to come out of this stronger. Aside from the economy and the businesses, the ultimate essential is having heart.”

Sannella is tucking away for safe-keeping that letter from Corr and Moffatt, the leaders of the class of 1970.

Follow your dreams, the letter writers advised.

“It gives me such hope and comfort,” Sannella said. “They endured such adversity and they overcame it with such strength. And the class of 2020 can overcome it. For sure.”

Thomas Farragher is a Globe columnist. He can be reached at thomas.farragher@globe.com.