

**50 Years of Women at Sewanee Gala Keynote Address
Meredith Walker, C'91
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I am honored to be here to help celebrate 50 years of women at Sewanee. I love this place.

My family has deep roots at Sewanee. We lived here when I was a kid while my Dad finished college and then went to seminary. We spent our summers here.

In two weeks my brother will be married here. This is the same brother who was born in the old hospital, where my sister and I both lived when we were students.

My sister and brother-in-law were married in All Saints'. I graduated from here in 1991. And now, my niece is a junior at Sewanee. Added to all of these connections, my parents live in a house on campus.

Sewanee is more home to me than my hometown. It's here that I started to find my way to the person I hoped to become.

I hope that's what Sewanee did for all of us... By guiding us to think about things in ways we hadn't before... By helping us develop a deeper understanding of ourselves: our character strengths, our interests... By steering us to examine our beliefs... or the beliefs handed down to us.

I know that during my time as a student here, one class in particular really did this for me. That class was "The History of Blacks in Film."

Taught by iconic Sewanee professor and civil rights advocate Scott Bates, in this class we learned about the Highlander Folk School in Monteagle, where Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Rosa Parks had trained. But the primary focus of the class centered on the Oscar-winning civil rights documentary, *Eyes on the Prize*. It was an eye-opening program about the civil rights movement, and the people who endured subjugation and cruelty as they fought for equality, dignity, and justice.

I came away from the class knowing the power of storytelling.

Knowing that storytelling can amplify voices that were so easily unheard before. It can make clearer the faces that were abstract before. It can speak truth to the powerful. And make people listen.

That class served as my entry point to becoming more involved in social action and wanting to help deliver the truth—news and information and stories that need to be heard.

After earning my highly marketable degree in religion, I worked in government and kitchens and cubicles. Eventually, I found my way to TV production and worked on good and not-very-good television shows.

(I can't stop you from googling The John McEnroe Show, but I hope you won't)

Out of all that I have done through the years, the work of which I am most proud came from creating an organization with my best friend, Amy Poehler. Amy Poehler's Smart Girls.

Smart Girls is an online community for girls and young women and all of the people who care about them. We encourage the idea of the conscientious citizen—to be reliably informed, to guard against being manipulated by deceitful messages, and to be confident that their beliefs are founded in fact. We publish articles and videos and hold workshops and summits—all meant to offer young women a view of options... to help them to see that they don't have to follow any certain path or timeline in order to have a rich and interesting life.

We created a mouthpiece for girls and women to tell their stories. What we have heard from them is that they want to be treated with respect. Not dismissed or diminished because they are female or because of any other part of their identity.

Women can accomplish incredible things if obstacles are not put up in their path and justified as “that's the way we have always done things.” When doors are closed based on “that's the way we have always done things”—the doors are also closed to the gifts and talents that we bring into the room.

Fifty years ago there were a lot of closed doors and now, while there aren't as many, some people still want to exclude our talents and gifts. We live in a time when men in power callously assess a woman's worth by her physical attraction on a scale of one to ten. When they call women "dogs." When they feel entitled to grab your body. Some progress has been made but we are not done.

Everyone here shares the good fortune of having received a top-quality education. Universities are supposed to nourish us with intellectual curiosity and honesty of thought. They are places to acquire knowledge and work out what really matters to us.

Ideally, we graduate with skills that are needed to function as a healthy member of the community, but because there is work left to be done, I think we need more than that.

Life after college is confusing, and weird and difficult—probably more so for women. I have been thinking about it and wonder—what if Sewanee offered a few courses specially designed to help with the reality women face as they enter adulthood?

I've come up with a list of proposed classes and want to run them by y'all tonight.

1. *Communication 101: Comebacks to Use on Misogynists, with an emphasis on sick burns to silence trolls online.*
2. *Perspectives on Women's Protest Signs Then and Now. (This class meets just once, because our protest signs are the same decade after decade)*
3. *Linguistics: Intro to Businessman Jargon: Proactive learnings for the low-hanging fruits of synergy as a win/win. (We can circle back to this one)*
4. *Elementary Social Media: Reputational maintenance using the most flattering filters and trending hashtags #FRIYAY #BLESSED*
5. *Film Appreciation: 9 to 5 Every Day. In this comprehensive film theory class, we just literally watch the classic movie 9 to 5 every day. That's it.*

6. *Media Literacy and Relative Rhetoric: In this class, we will learn basic fact-checking in line with how to resist Facebook arguments with creepy step-uncles you haven't seen since you had braces. The ones who love to forward links from questionable sources such as DeepStateHaterChristian.net/patriot.*

7. *Equality in the Workplace: HAHHAHAHA. This isn't a class because it isn't a thing.*

Laughing at this stuff is better than just feeling awful. Laughing at it takes some of its power away. And the truth is that these are issues we are still having to fight to resolve.

We never stop needing to learn. We never stop growing up. We never stop becoming.

As I thought about this celebratory weekend, what kept coming back to me is that there is no “Sewanee Woman.”

There are Sewanee Women.

We are a varied bunch, and we come in all manner of thinking and being. We all have our own story to tell. Yet we all applied to attend college here, on this beautifully secluded part of the Cumberland Plateau.

We all wanted to be here this weekend, to return, to celebrate each other, to celebrate with each other. Especially the bold women who opened the door for the rest of us. They went first, and they faced challenges many of us didn't know about.

In the 1970s, women didn't have the same rights that we take for granted today. There was no Title IX yet. Women couldn't run in marathons or have credit cards in their own name. Nevertheless, women enrolled here, knowing it would be a challenge to be recognized as intellectual peers and equals.

So, to the Sewanee Women who paved the way during a time long before “Girl Power” and “Yass Queen”—we thank you.

Before I close, I want to ask you to do something for me.

At Smart Girls, we applaud curiosity because we know that when people learn more about each other, wonderful things can happen.

I invite you to channel your inner smart girls and find someone here, someone you don't know as well as others or don't know at all. Have a conversation with them. Find out what they miss the most about Sewanee, and what they don't miss too, and ask what they've been up to since they graduated. Ask them why they wanted to be here this weekend. By being curious about each other, we will leave tomorrow feeling a little less disconnected, a little less stuck in our own bubbles, and all the more grateful for our time at Sewanee.

You are all here because you are smart. And you are brave.

Many of you brave enough to have eaten at the Truck Stop, more than once. I am glad to be among you. This a place like no other and we are better people for having studied here.

Sewanee discovered something 50 years ago that we already know. **WOMEN MAKE EVERYTHING BETTER!**