

## Remembering Elizabeth

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Our beloved friend and Trumbull College roommate **Elizabeth Alling Sewall** died on September 1 of breast cancer. We all will miss her dearly and wanted to share our best memories of her. **Nancy Seijas Vermeulen** remembers, "When we all got our housing assignments to suite B42 in Durfee Hall, it was Elizabeth who sent the 'Hi, Everybody!' letter, introducing herself and telling us all how excited she was to be coming to Yale, as well as a little scared. (By the way, it was a real handwritten letter that circulated among the six of us that summer before our Freshman Year.) That was the first act of courage I ever saw her perform, and over the years I studied how she did it. Faced with something scary, Elizabeth would arm herself with optimism and true grit and just get to work. No hesitation. She would trust in the world and herself, and throw herself into the task without looking back. There was just one time that she let on that she needed a little extra boost to charge forward, and that boost was always the same thing: a pair of cream-colored panty hose and cream-colored pumps. (It was the '80s.) She told us that if you put those on with a navy suit, you would be ready for anything. Then she would stride down those four flights of Durfee steps looking like she could take on the world."



Panty hose and pumps are the kinds of things courageous people use when they are young. Then they go on to make a strong and stable marriage, to Gordon Sewall, and rear two sons (Scott and Duncan) into fine young men. And then they show the rest of us how to take on whatever challenges we face, often by telling the truth. Elizabeth was the kind of friend who did not mince words and did not always say what you wanted to hear. Even in college, she would tell you, gently but firmly, that you were being a jerk, that she thought your outfit did not quite match, or that maybe you should think about getting a job or an internship, rather than living on her couch for the summer. As **Maria Montoya** remembers, "We became mothers at the same time, so we would often talk over the phone as we were commuting home from work about our kids and our issues with them. I have no doubt that her sons Scott and Duncan felt the loving, warm and gentle but firm hand of Elizabeth. She pushed those she loved to live a life of service and friendship. She did not suffer whiners or mopers. In one particularly self-pitying moment, as I was complaining to her about work and family, she said, 'Why can't you just be happy?' I was stunned because it sounded harsh. I realized she wasn't being rhetorical or flip, she

was truly asking a simple but blunt question. She pressed for an answer. I couldn't answer then, but I spent the next few months pondering that simple question: 'Why can't you just be happy?' It turned out to be one of the most important ones anyone ever asked me."



For Elizabeth, friends were important. She had a knack for making them and keeping them close through the years and through all of the changes that growing up and life inevitably bring. She connected with people on a very deep level: you felt as if you had known her for a long time, even when you first met her. It follows that she was the driving force behind what her Trumbull roommates have come to call the "College Chums Reunion." When we were just out of Yale, they

were modest and often involved catching a simple dinner together in New York. As we got older, had a bit of money, and could squeeze out a weekend, we would travel together. From Florida to Santa Fe to Napa Valley to Hawai'i we explored the great food, wine, and spas that these places had to offer. But mostly we basked in the joys of being with one another for a weekend-long sleep-over. Frankly, we were a bit selfish and wanted to keep that feeling for ourselves, but Elizabeth was always the most inclusive and the most outgoing of any of us. She took that openness and used it in all the work she did for Yale after graduation. For Yale, a place she loved and worked for tirelessly, Elizabeth was a dedicated Alumna and an amazing 25<sup>th</sup> Reunion Chair. She wanted every Yale grad to share in the same fun that we had organized for ourselves over the years. The last reunion she attended, our 25<sup>th</sup>, was a spectacularly elegant and well-run event...exactly as she would have wanted it.

Elizabeth's energy and spirit were always inspirational. It is not clear to us whether she had more energy than the average mortal or whether her superior organizational skills magnified her efforts exponentially. **Siobhan Sharkey** (Yale '87, who also just passed away in December 2012), wrote, "She was all about meaningful conversations and activities. Each day brought 24 hours of opportunity to live and enjoy versus to get through. What new recipe or book or triathlon to try next? Why repeat when there was more to explore! Trip to Africa? She was in. Trip to Greece? Let's go. Good wine only, please—no time for bad." **Laura Siner Kornegay** writes of her amazing energy, "Hers was always the first Christmas card of the season. During our visits there was a good chance I would be reaching for that first morning coffee when greeting Elizabeth who

was already showered and ready for the day after a six mile run. She regularly would share tales of delicious recipes discovered in the likes of *Gourmet* magazine that she had actually found time to try out, with of course mouthwatering results.” She even found time to *contribute* a recipe, her husband Gordon’s pot roast, to *Gourmet*. So, of course, it is no wonder that she turned out to be an extraordinary professional colleague with an established record of excellence in fund raising for independent schools, holding leadership roles at Lawrence Academy, Westminster School, and, most recently, as Director of Advancement, the Fessenden School, where she led the most successful campaign in the school’s history.

Elizabeth became even more inspiring in dealing with her disease. She put living with cancer on her to-do list and carried on. Miss the chums gathering in Savannah following her initial surgery and chemo treatments? Not happening. Germ mask for the airplane and big floppy sun hat and Elizabeth was there smiling with the rest of us. We didn’t do much...a walk on the beach, a light dinner, and lots of cramming into one room to cuddle and talk. As ever, Elizabeth was brave, showing us her scar and her bald head, and helping us, even then, to come to terms with the preciousness of life. Every missive about her health, no matter how potentially alarming, was straightforward about the facts, but always upbeat, with perhaps a joke or an amusing anecdote. They were classic Elizabeth: one part can-do, take charge problem-solver and one part loving caretaker, as she made sure to keep all those who cared about her informed and comforted. Elizabeth’s seemingly endless energy often lent inspiration to do more, but her strength of spirit and the way that manifested in warmth, love, and acceptance of others will always serve as a reminder of how to *be* more.

On Graduation Day from Yale, Elizabeth gave each of us a silver frame (the perfectly appropriate gift) with “Yale 1986” engraved on it. To this day, Maria’s sits on her shelf with a photo of all of us on Old Campus, “smoking” from our little white clay pipes on Class Day. **Julie Sheehan**’s sits on a bookshelf with a photo of us at our “dead week” trip to Cape Cod. The gift came with a quote from St. Augustine: “All kinds of things rejoiced my soul in their company – to talk and laugh and do each other kindnesses; read pleasant books together, pass from lightest jesting to talk of the deepest things, and back again; to differ without rancor...teach each other or learn from each other; be impatient for the return of the absent, and welcome them with joy on their homecoming; these and such like things, proceeding from our hearts as we gave affection..., kindled a flame which fused our very



souls and of many made us one.” We all tried to live up to that ideal of friendship...she made us want to do that. Who knew on that first day in Durfee B-42 in September of 1982 that such a wonderful friend would be among us?

Our last College Chums visit occurred around a hospital bed in the colonial home Elizabeth shared with her husband and their two sons. Her mother Cynthia Alling of Charlottesville, Virginia and her brother **Greg Alling** (Yale '88) of Manila, Philippines were also there, visiting, as was her cherished friend Lucy Mathews Heegaard. Elizabeth had just entered hospice care, her breast cancer beyond treatment, despite the efforts of her medical team at Dana-Farber Cancer Institute, whose research she helped advance. Julie writes, “She was ravaged in body, but her assured sense of self and pragmatic humor were alive and well. She joked about whether she’d be able to leave behind an unfinished to-do list (her second-favorite accessory, after a strand of pearls). We reminisced about Yale, about our past College Chums reunions, about her family, so central to her identity, and we caught each other up on our far-flung lives. Then I asked her whether she was afraid to die. ‘I’m not afraid, no,’ she said. ‘I’m not afraid.’ It was impossible not to believe her. Especially when she added, ‘Don’t mope.’”