



Dr. Stephen R. Briggs

Stewardship of place

Memorial Gym, as it was known when I was a child, was much more than a gymnasium for the children who grew up on the Berry campus. It was the center of our universe. It was where we gathered to play basketball or hit tennis balls against the wall on rainy days. It was also where we all learned how to swim under the gentle hand of my father, Garland Dickey.

The gym also served as a gathering place for the college students. The gym was where we played intramural basketball games. The only weight room on campus was for many years in the same room as the pool table and ping pong table in the southwest corner of the building. On any given day, that room would be crowded with college athletes lifting weights as well as college students and faculty/staff children. ... It was a place where generations of Berry folk comingled, perhaps more than any other place on campus.

Jennifer Dickey (77A, 80C)

Residential colleges need natural gathering places. Much of what is learned in college occurs in interactions among people with different backgrounds, interests and experiences. Learning of this sort is spontaneous and spirited; it happens in the hallways where students live and in the dining halls where they eat. Gathering spots provide a context in which emerging friendships can thrive.

For decades, Memorial Gymnasium served such a role. Constructed from 1936 to 1938 on what Martha Berry described as “a lovely hill just opposite the Mothers’ (now Evans) Building, near the (Blackstone) Dining Hall,” Memorial Gymnasium was designed as part of the main campus quadrangle, with the library and Green Hall to the west and Moon and Laughlin buildings to the east.

The gymnasium was funded in part by an anonymous gift from a lead donor just after her first and only visit to Berry and was called “Memorial” in honor of her mother. In sending the check, the donor wrote that “this

visit with you and your ‘family’ was one of the happiest and most inspiring of my life and shall live forever in my memory!”

On July 4, 1936, during a summer of drought, Martha Berry wrote to the donor, “You see how important and what a godsend your gift was, as it has kept many boys and girls busy, when there could have been nothing else. The boys are making brick for the gymnasium, and still others will work at laying the walls when the excavations are completed. ... We like to think that every dollar that comes to Berry is used on both sides, but yours went even further. It helped the Schools, it helped the neediest students, and it serves ultimately as a beautiful and lasting memorial to your mother.”

In the 1940s and 1950s, Memorial Gymnasium was a hub of campus life, a center for recreational and sports activities for both the high school and the college. Even in the 1960s and 1970s, the college’s track and baseball field were located behind it on large athletic fields that had been cleared by students in 1941. Ironically, a

1937 master plan of the college by Cooper & Cooper, the Boston architectural firm that designed most of Berry’s early buildings, also shows a football field, complete with goal posts, behind the gymnasium.

RENEWAL

As buildings were added to the main campus, its center of gravity moved north. In 1986, varsity soccer and baseball fields were relocated adjacent to the varsity gymnasium on the Ford campus. The 50-year-old Memorial Gymnasium, now on the southern edge of campus, served a diminished role in the everyday life of students and needed a major makeover. Fortunately, an important family in Berry’s history stepped forward to breathe new life into the structure.

Berry Trustee Alice Richards designated a gift to renovate the facility, which was renamed Roy Richards Memorial Gymnasium for her late husband, a Berry trustee who attended the Mount Berry School for Boys. This renovation allowed the building to serve students well for an



The old indoor pool has been reborn as a strength-and-conditioning facility for Berry students.

additional 20 years as Berry's primary intramurals and fitness center.

With the opening of the Steven J. Cage Athletic and Recreation Center in 2008, the future of the then 70-year-old Richards Gymnasium again became uncertain, its primary purpose assigned to a brand-new facility. Although there was a strong desire to find a replacement role, the structure itself did not readily allow for repurposing.

ADAPTIVE REUSE

Berry is committed to the concept of sustainability, and we understand that term in its broadest sense. Sustainability includes good programs for recycling, water management and energy utilization. It reflects our enduring commitment to local agriculture, the preservation of monarch trees and forestry management. Sustainability also means constructing new buildings wisely according to LEED standards, as well as preserving and renewing our heritage structures whenever possible.

Paradoxically, the best way to sustain a heritage structure is to ensure that it has a vital current use. What happens when a building becomes costly to maintain but serves only a limited purpose in the life of the campus? Such structures are difficult to justify.

Berry has a wonderful history of adaptive reuse – of using a historic structure in creative new ways. Blackstone Hall's conversion to a theater is one such example, and the transformation of the Normandy dairy barns into the WinShape Retreat is another adaptation that won a National Historic Trust Preservation Award.

In 2010, however, after several studies concluded that Richards Gymnasium could not reasonably be converted into a classroom or residential facility, a plan was approved to replace it, preserving its marble columns for reuse and repurposing the land for a residential student village.

Then, in 2011, with the decision to add varsity football, a new possibility emerged: This historic gymnasium might be renovated

to serve as a field house to meet the needs of Berry's lacrosse and tennis teams, as well as the new football program. This would also allow for a refurbished dance studio, a priority for the dance program since the opening of the Cage Center. In the end, it was determined that such a restoration would be a good fit for the facility and would also provide an excellent return on investment, creating 20,000 square feet of high-quality space that would otherwise be unaffordable.

The renovation of Richards Gym commenced this May and was completed prior to the start of the school year, breathing new life into this venerable old building in a manner comparable to Alice Richards' gift honoring her husband 25 years previously. We now appreciate the structure's bones more than ever: Construction workers were amazed at the depth and solidity of its walls, those bricks made and laid by Berry students 75 years ago.

This project captured the true spirit of stewardship of place by preserving, renewing and honoring what has long been an important gathering place for Berry students. Once again, there is buzz among the students about it, just as there was when Memorial Gymnasium was first opened to celebratory bonfires and the ringing of bells. As Martha Berry wrote in a letter to the original donor, "Things seem to be going well. ... You will be pleased to know that the boys ... are doing more and more with sports. They work hard and play hard and seem very happy."

THE REST OF THE STORY

Dale Smith (85C) attended Berry as a co-op student, also working at Delta Airlines. He had fallen in love with Berry's beauty while visiting campus with his mother. As a student, Dale competed in intramurals in Memorial Gymnasium, swam in its pool and played racquetball on its outdoor courts. But he was surprised after his graduation to receive a call from Vice President John Lipscomb asking about the proposal to rename the gymnasium after Roy Richards.

Dale had no idea that his grandmother gave the gift that made the gymnasium he had enjoyed as a student possible.

Dale's grandmother was Louise Maytag Smith from Prattville, Ala., who made the gift in honor of her mother, Dena Bergman Maytag, wife of the founder of the Maytag appliance company. Martha Berry struck up a friendship with the two women when they happened to meet in the early 1930s.

Louise Smith and Martha Berry corresponded for seven years but rarely saw each other due to the declining health of each. Mrs. Smith, however, developed a passion for the work of the Berry Schools and was a faithful contributor even after Martha Berry's death. Yet, she declined the opportunity to attend the gymnasium's dedication ceremony, citing her preference for the "background to the limelight."

Dale Smith describes his grandmother as "the sweetest lady in the world, always with a smile." Already proud to be a Berry graduate, he is especially delighted that Louise Smith and Martha Berry found each other and that part of his grandmother's legacy is on the Berry campus.

So now, after 75 years, we all know the rest of the story, a story built on generosity and sustained through stewardship. **B**

Of all the buildings on the Berry campus, Richards Gymnasium holds the most special memories for me. ... it was the place where I spent more time than any other except for the home in which I grew up. It will always for me be inextricably linked with my father, and I have no doubt that somewhere he is smiling as this beautiful, venerable building once again becomes an important part of the Berry community.

Jennifer Dickey