

Good evening, sisters. What a pleasure it is to be here and to rekindle my association with Phi Mu.

Phi Mu meant so much to me when I was at college. I went to Rollins College, and I can't overstate the importance of a fellow sister's influence on my being there. I met Sally Reed in summer stock in Silver Springs, FL when I was 16, my first real acting job! We were doing a play called "Time Out For Ginger" and Sara played my older sister in the play. We were roomed together in a hotel in town, and so she told me about Rollins and the theatre department there. During college night at my high school (Henry Grady High School in Atlanta, Ga.), I think I was the only one who went into the room with the representative from Rollins.

I applied to Rollins and to several other colleges and universities, and was accepted at all, but Rollins offered in the largest scholarship. That increased my incentive to go there! Of course, having met Sara, it was wonderful to know someone on campus. And when it came time for rush, I went to several sororities, but Sara was a Phi Mu, and when asked, I pledged there.

We didn't have a lot of money, and I was able to join a sorority because of the generosity of my Mother's good friend Virginia Shields. She knew how important it would be for me to be in a sorority, and she paid my initiation and all my dues throughout my time at Rollins.

I was president of my pledge class, although looking back I can't say what that meant or what we did. It was a more gentle time. Hazing I've heard about in subsequent years and at other schools astonishes me. I don't remember being asked to do any horrible things – in fact, the most outstanding memory I have of that time is the night we were made sisters. We were brought to the Phi Mu house on campus and it was all sort of spooky, and we were taken one by one down to the basement blindfolded and barefoot and told to step into a basin of what we were

told was blood and guts – but of course, it turned out to be jello! However, the experience of that cold, squishy stuff between my toes was shivering and we all screamed, which made the waiting pledges very fearful.

After my freshman year in the freshman dorm, I lived in the Phi Mu house for two years. It's a wonderful house on the Rollins campus and we had a lovely housemother. I thoroughly enjoyed living there. My senior year I lived in an honor house, a new experiment then. There were 8 women in a white clapboard house near the theatre, and there was no housemother. That was the big deal. We were on our honor to behave as young ladies – and we did. Now, unfortunately the position of housemother has disappeared. I often thought then that it would be a nice job, and I'm sorry it's no longer available. Of course, this was back in the days when the sexes were separated in dorms and houses, and there were curfews, and I'm old-fashioned enough to think that was a good thing.

During my senior year, I applied for and won a Fulbright Scholarship to study in London after I graduated from Rollins. So I spent a year in London at the London Academy of Music and Dramatic Art – the acronym is LAMDA. It was a fabulous year. I went to school 5 days a week from 9 to 6 learning what I most wanted to learn, and in the evenings I went to the theatre, which was an education in itself.

When I returned to the States I got my first job at the Front St. Theatre in Memphis, TN where I got my Equity card. I then went to Canada and became a landed immigrant there – the equivalent of a green card. I had heard that the theatre in Canada was closer to that in England, and in the US, regional theatre was only just beginning. I spent 8 years off and on working all across Canada, gaining experience with wonderful actors and theatres.

My time in Canada came to an end when I was diagnosed with Gillian-Barre, a syndrome that falls under the umbrella of polyneuritis. I've actually had it twice, which gets most doctors' attention. It's rare and to have it twice, extremely rare. It took a chunk out of my life. I was very lucky that we arrested it before I would have needed to be put in an iron lung. Easter Seal gets a special star in my book because I went there to learn how to walk again.

So, I went back Atlanta, GA, where I grew up, to stay at home with my Mother and get well. And then I began playing in shows at the Alliance Theatre there in Atlanta, directing plays at Georgia Tech, and being a disk jockey 6 days a week for a classical music radio station. I really enjoyed radio and my secret desire is to own a radio station and play classical music all the time.

Finally I got up the nerve to go to New York, and I've been there ever since. It took me 5 years before I could get a decent job in the theatre on a NY stage. "Present Laughter" with George C. Scott was my first real job there. I suppose you could say that I haven't stopped working since, but in truth there are often long fallow periods between jobs.

I made my first movie in 1984 – I had a small part in a movie called "Explorers," a pretty silly movie that starred the youngsters Ethan Hawke and River Phoenix. Since then I've made about 20 or so movies and am very grateful for being able to do so, because believe me, you can't make a living in the theatre.

I'm also indebted to people who have helped and inspired me along the way, starting with my Mother, who was an actress in Atlanta, and who also directed at Ga. Tech. She imbued me with a love of language and certainly without her I would not be an actress today.

I also had wonderful teachers at Rollins and at LAMDA, and while attending theatre in England, I was inspired by seeing Rosemary Harris and Maggie Smith and Laurence Olivier and Joan Plowright at the top of their game.

In addition to my love of reading historical novels, classical music has been important to me through the years. I remember when preparing Hedda Gabler I used to listen to Bartok's Concerto For Orchestra – it somehow seemed to express what Hedda was going through and gave me insights to deeper emotions. I also read a book about Ibsen by an Ibsen scholar that helped me understand the background of the play and why Ibsen wrote it. So that's the kind of thing I will do sometimes when approaching a play.

As I look back over the years, favorite experiences include playing Annie Sullivan in "The Miracle Worker," Daisy in "Driving Miss Daisy," Mistress Quickly in "Henry IV" at Lincoln Center, and Mrs. Malaprop in "The Rivals." Of course, all the roles I've played are somewhere inside me full of memory – those are just a few that spring to mind.

As for movies, I think one of ones I had the most fun on is little known – it's called "The Impostors" and was directed by Stanley Tucci, who also starred in it with Oliver Platt. It's a comedy on a ship and there were so many NY actors involved in the filming of the ballroom scene -- it went on for over a week. It was just great fun to be with all those folks all the time. As a supporting player I have found that usually when making a movie you act with a few isolated people, and never even meet or see many of the other actors in the film.

One of my abiding interests is travel, studying history and cultures of the ancient world. I call myself an Egyptophile and I've been to Egypt 4 times. I've traveled with an organization called Archaeological Tours. I'm also a member of the Archaeological Institute of America, and have traveled with their tours to the Black Sea and to Iran. England, France and Italy are old friends to me, and I recently took a trip with the Metropolitan Museum of Art to Versailles and Paris all about Marie Antoinette – she's another hobby interest of mine.

These interests feed into enlivening the work I do, and sometimes give me direct and specific information about a period the play may be set in.

I've never married. I had several boyfriends when I was younger and with each one we would talk about marriage, but I could never see myself growing old with that person. Also, getting work and traveling for work seemed to take precedence over settling down – it's so hard to get your foot in the door in this business. I never had a burning desire for children as so many women do. Looking back, I don't think I would have been a very good mother anyway – I have a hard enough time with my cat! Sometimes I think I have many children – that all the roles I've played are my children.

Last year, when I was chosen to be on the cover of Phi Mu's Aglaia I was very impressed with myself! It was really such an honor and I sort of couldn't believe it happened. It was the harbinger to some other terrific events in my life earlier this year. In January I was inducted to the Theatre Hall of Fame, and in February I received an honorary doctorate from Rollins College.

Phi Mu seems to be coming full circle in my life. I think the precepts of the creed – Love, Honor and Truth -- have been guiding my life for a long time: while I was struggling to have a career in the theatre, and since then, when I have been able to look back and marvel at my good fortune. Of course, I could wish that I had gotten rich along the way, but the richness of my work has been a compensation granted to few.

It's a special treat and honor to be invited to Convention and to be asked to speak to you tonight. I was lucky to grow up in an inquiring, educated family that revered learning. I'm sure some of you did too. As part of my giving back, I now serve on the board of Actors' Equity Association, and am on the board of The Acting Company, which tours classics with young actors across the US to communities that don't have theatre. And recently I went back to Rollins to work with the students there. I performed with them in "The Importance of Being Earnest," and worked with them as the dialect and voice coach, as well as doing scene study with them. It was a marvelous experience and I'd like to do more with teaching.

I have always believed in continuing to learn every day of your life. Why, just on this trip I have learned about black napkins and donut desserts. But seriously, I salute your support of educational opportunities and life skills learning. They are more important today than ever before. I know that many of you make helping through the Phi Mu Foundation a priority in your life. That work serves so many, and is truly giving “a helping hand.” Your support of good works makes you angels in my book and I know Sir Fidel would be very proud of you.

And I am very proud to call myself a Phi Mu and be part of the Phi Mu tradition. I’ve really enjoyed being here. Thank you for inviting me.