

# PREZ • to • PREZ Q& A



**Alumnae  
Association  
President Elisabeth  
Kinney McNiel '89  
sits down with  
Converse  
President  
Betsy Fleming**



**Betsy, what one thing do you find surprises alumnae most about Converse today?**

That's a great question, Elisabeth. I would be hard pressed to say that there's just one thing that surprises Converse alumnae about their alma mater today. It's more akin to observations that are tied to two things: 1) the aspirations, accomplishments and activated voices of our current students; and 2) the beauty and evolution of the Converse campus.

At such special events that draw alumnae back to campus, they seem to find boldness and inspiration in this current generation of Converse students. There's certainly widespread recognition that the face of the College is changing, that every decade brings new fashions, trends and diversity. But, more importantly, our alumnae are blown away by the Converse students of today—what they want to do in the world and how they plan to make those dreams happen. They also see that those students love Converse for her sisterhood and the relationships with faculty, staff and peers—the same reasons why the alumnae so cherish *their* Converse.

As for the beauty of the campus, there has been very conscientious attention paid to enhancing this gorgeous physical plant. I welcome the "oohs and aahs" about our new apartment housing The Heath, the technology-savvy renovations of Kuhn Hall, and the plans for renewing Pell and Dexter Halls and for building the new Marsha H. Gibbs Field House. As Board Chair Betsy Crane Griffith '72 often says, "if you haven't been here in a while, you need to come home to Converse."

**Alumnae hear lots of buzz about online learning at colleges across the nation and about Converse's new online degree programs. How does this changing landscape impact Converse?**

The online platform is truly revolutionizing teaching and learning. It provides entrée to anyone with a computer, internet access and the strong drive to learn. Converse wants to be a part of this transformation.

We've been working in partnership with SC-ETV for a number of years now to provide online professional development programs for educators. So, our experience in this "new" modality enabled us to develop and launch first-rate online



graduate degree programs in February 2012. These have been enthusiastically welcomed by professionals in the field. In addition, since summer 2010 we have been offering summer online undergraduate courses in the liberal arts as a means of introducing faculty to the online environment and fine-tuning pedagogy. Ultimately, Converse is distinguished by the personalized education and mentoring provided to both undergraduate and graduate students—and our online students indicate that this distinction has been striking in their experiences. These strategies lead to strong outcomes.

We will always remain committed to those approaches, thus to traditional classroom teaching in addition to developing a selection of learning opportunities through other modes of delivery.

We are expanding our efforts, developing additional courses and degree programs to further meet the needs of our post-traditional (adult) students and to ensure our undergraduate

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Margaret Mead

students know how to maximize technology in their research and learning. I expect that a growing number of adults interested in higher education degrees, including alumni, their friends and associates, key constituents and members of the Spartanburg community will look to Converse for online learning opportunities. We must: for as Margaret Mead noted “We are now at a point where we must educate our children in what no one knew yesterday, and prepare our schools for what no one knows yet.”

#### What do you do for fun and relaxation?

Hmmm, I have lots of interests—most are about satiating my curiosity and love of learning! I read, power walk, practice yoga and bike. I enjoy music and art of all kinds and seek out museums whenever I travel. My siblings are all foodies. So

I've picked up a passion for good food and cool restaurants. My schedule for Converse keeps me running, but when I do vacation, it usually involves exploration, exercise and sleep! Cycling, scuba diving, snow skiing and hanging out at the beach with my family are my most preferred activities.

**If you could invite one woman in history to join Converse students for dinner in Gee, who would it be?**

Martha Graham! My mother took me to see the Martha Graham Dance Company when I was very young. That performance is vividly etched in my memory. It was the first time I saw modern dance and relished the dancer's grace and fluidity, strength and vulnerability. As I mature, the more I appreciate Martha Graham's story—how her passion for a new kind of dance transformed the role of art in the United States.

You're the President; you can invite as many women to dinner as you like!

But, do I have to limit my answer to just one woman?

Well then, in light of this year's SGA theme *Embrace the Revolution* and my own appreciation for bold, creative, courageous trailblazers, I would also ask Helen Frankenthaler for boundary-breaking

abstract art-making in a field dominated by men. I'd invite Elizabeth I. She inherited a mess left by the void of her father's reign and transformed England into a global power. How about Marian Anderson, whose bronze likeness stands outside of Twichell Auditorium? She had such a stunning voice and used her talent to advance appreciation for African American performers and advocate for civil rights. I would add Gloria Steinem for her ability to amplify action around social justice; Hillary Clinton, as a product of a women's college and the consummate champion for women worldwide; Martina Navratilova for her spirit of determination; and Sandra Day O'Conner for her courage in being the first female on our nation's highest court. After reading the briefing about Executive Chef Doug Allen on page 8, I'm sure our conversation and our meal would be amazing!

**Betsy, we've heard you are a collector of fine shoes. Which pair of your shoes has gotten the most attention from Converse students?**

Yes, I am a shoe junkie! I'm not sure that there is one pair of shoes that the students like best, but they do love to take notice. And, I enjoy that. However, I did NOT wear my best shoes to run in the High-Heel Hundred race!



President Fleming's dream dinner in Gee would include (clockwise from top) Martha Graham, Helen Frankenthaler, Elizabeth I, Marian Anderson, Gloria Steinem, Hillary Clinton, Martina Navratilova and Sandra Day O'Conner.

**What do you see as Converse's greatest challenge in evolving to meet the needs of today's students?**

I see three:

- 1) access and affordability for those students who would most benefit from a Converse education
- 2) exceptional outcomes, including the continuous improvement of our already-strong 4-year graduation rates as well as job and graduate school placements
- 3) real relevance in the face of the dramatic changes that are taking place in higher education and the ever-changing demands of students, professions and workplaces

The kind of institution that will thrive in this world of global connectivity must be nimble and responsive to weather the volatility in the marketplace. Fortunately, Converse has a long and proud history of innovation and adaptability. We must now adopt an entrepreneurial spirit to actively enhance and adjust the best of Converse for our success in the future.

*To submit questions for the next issue's Q and A between President Fleming and the new Alumnae Association President, Amy Tibbals Morales '86, please email Carrie Coleman, Director of Alumnae and Donor Relations at carrie.coleman@converse.edu.*