

Voices from Bowdoin's Past  
Baccalaureate 2014

One month from tomorrow, Bowdoin College will officially be 220 years old. The College charter was signed on June 24, 1794.

Eight years later, the door to Massachusetts Hall opened for eight students—all white and all male. They were Richard, Isaac, Moses, George, Benjamin, two Johns, and Ebenezer.

A lot has changed about Bowdoin since then.

As far as I know, there are no Ebezers among us today—if there are, please stand up and be recognized! I don't see any Ebezers. But there are soon-to-be graduates here today who will head-off after tomorrow's festivities to change the world.

You will change the world with your ideas, your creativity, and your passion. And when you create something or build something or organize something that changes the world, you will be following a long tradition of firsts by people associated with this College.

We all know about Reed Hastings, Bowdoin Class of 1983. Reed changed the way we watch movies.

"I had a big late fee for 'Apollo 13,' Reed remembered. "It was six weeks late and I owed the video store \$40. I had misplaced the cassette...I didn't want to tell my wife about it. And I said to myself, 'I'm going to compromise the integrity of my marriage over a late fee?"

That's when Reed came up with the idea for a movie rental service with no due dates and no late fees, and Netflix was born.

A century earlier, Bowdoin professors Franklin Clement Robinson and Charles Hutchins were at the forefront of multiple international efforts to make x-ray technology safe and practical—transforming science and medicine in the process.

Other inventions with Bowdoin connections include Maine's first steam engine developed by Cyrus Hamlin, Class of 1834.

The incandescent light bulb was made successful by Thomas Edison but only *after* Francis Robbins Upton, Class of 1875, calculated the mathematical processes that made it work.

The Hall Effect—discovered by Edwin Hall, Class of 1875—made it possible to understand the nature of electric conduction.

And bone grafting, was invented by Frederick Houdlette Albee, Class of 1899.

“There is no intoxication...like the first discovery of new fields of knowledge; new unexplored worlds whose very existence one had not expected,” wrote Albee. “Surely no explorer in search of a new land, no collector on the trail of a rare item, experiences a greater thrill than the searcher after knowledge who sees his quarry always in sight and always a little ahead of him.”

Plenty of Bowdoin graduates have run that race and many have caught their “quarry.” In the process, they have also broken all sorts of barriers.

Admiral Robert Peary, Class of 1877, experienced unspeakable hardship and danger to stand at the top of the world.

Marathon runner Joan Benoit Samuelson, Class of 1979, won the Olympic trials just seventeen days after knee surgery and only three months later beat legendary runners to capture the gold medal at the 1984 Olympic Games.

And Marine Corps Second Lieutenant Sage Santangelo, Class of 2012, went way out on a limb—just this spring—arguing publicly that women ought to go through the same physical training as men and ought also to be allowed as many chances as men to pass the prestigious Marine Corps Infantry Officers Course.

“My hope is that the Marine Corps will allow every Marine the opportunity to compete,” wrote Santangelo. “And that when we fail, our failure is seen simply as a challenge to others to succeed.”

Just days after Sage made her case in the *Washington Post*, the Marine Corps commandant decided she was right and changed the rules. The Marine Corps changed the rules!!! THAT doesn't happen very often.

Rocking the boat a bit in the name of progress is also what Alfred Kinsey, Class of 1916, did when he boldly set out to research and document human sexuality in the more “buttoned-up” 1950s. Kinsey famously said that...“*The only unnatural sex act is that which you cannot perform.*” Well that was a statement before its time!

Whether you agree with him or not, there's no disputing that Kinsey shook things up. Yet, as you look around at your classmates today, remember that no matter how well you think you know someone, you probably can't predict their future. Kinsey's classmates had no idea. In his yearbook they wrote: “*If you loosen up a bit more, Al, you will make quite a man!*”

Other firsts by people associated with Bowdoin include the microscale organic chemistry apparatus and curriculum, pioneered by professors Dana Mayo and Sam Butcher, and the Claff Explosion-Proof Heart Defibrillator, invented by C. Lloyd Claff, Bowdoin, 1918.

An “explosion proof” heart defibrillator?!? That seems important!

Then there’s something I am oh so close to needing myself: The HeadBlade, invented by Todd Greene of the Class of 1989.

Todd started losing his hair here in Brunswick at age nineteen, but he decided to stand up and change the discussion.

*“I’ve always hated the word ‘bald,’” Todd once wrote. “To me ‘bald’ is a bad word. Bald is not something someone wishes upon their kid: ‘Oh I hope he grows up to be tall and bald.’ “I make products for head-shavers. Balding is passive. Shaving is active. Once you shave your head, you are not balding; With a shaved head...the table turns from victim to victor!”*

Todd Greene’s invention is more than a grooming accessory – it’s also a work of art included in the permanent collection of the Museum of Modern Art in New York City, an institution founded with the help of Jere Abbott, Bowdoin Class of 1920, and the museum’s first associate director.

Bowdoin people have also created whole movements: Hanley Denning of the Class of 1992 started Safe Passage to empower the children of Guatemala, while Geoff Canada, Class of ’74, has devoted his career and considerable skills to empowering the children of Harlem.

Some Bowdoin students are inspired to change the world during their time here. Others know their mission all along. For Geoff, who grew up in poverty in the Bronx, college was never just a way out. It was a way back in.

*“If I’m a Bowdoin student,” Geoff said in 1995, “I can go away and spend four years in Maine and come out four years later with no idea that there is any crisis happening out here at all.”*

*“I went to Bowdoin to come back here.”*

Which takes us back to that September day in 1802 when Ebenezer and his classmates walked through the freshly painted door to Massachusetts Hall for the first time; back to that day when Bowdoin’s first president, Joseph McKeen, focused this College on the common good.

President McKeen urged us to use our mental powers for the benefit of society and to exert our talents for the public good. And that’s exactly what Bowdoin men and women have done for the past two centuries.

Class of 2014, you leave here well prepared and limited only by what you can imagine.

And knowing as many of you as I do, I know you can imagine a lot!

Go forth and dazzle us. It's *your* turn now.

Thank you for listening.