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Origins

A “Strange and Exciting” Step

Marion Nelson (née Movius, BS '74) was a member of Caltech's first class of undergraduate women, which entered the Institute 50 years ago, in 1970. Three years later, as a senior, she wrote an article about her experiences at Caltech that she submitted to Seventeen magazine. Below is a condensed version of that piece. After Caltech, Nelson earned a master's degree in math and also pursued a teaching credential. She married Norm Nelson (BS '76) in 1975 and moved to San Diego, where she taught high school math and physics, raised their four children, and became, she says, “a pretty good tap and jazz dancer.”

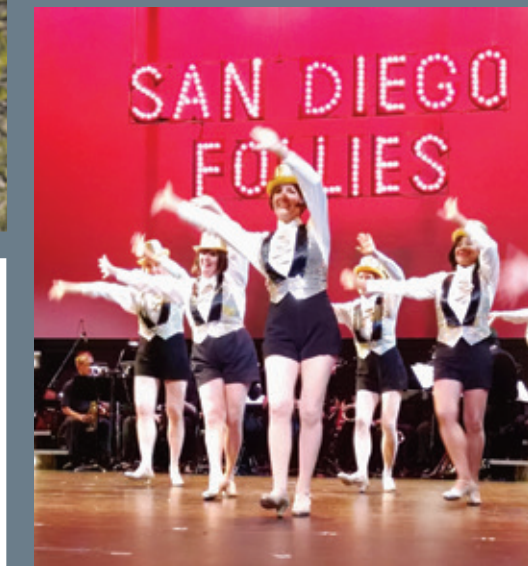
How would you feel walking onto an all-male campus as one of the first co-ed freshman class? I took that strange and exciting step three years ago, and it turned out to be the best thing I could ever have done for myself.

Being conspicuous: that was what it was all about for a good part of that first year. I was fresh out of a normal public high school with a boy-girl ratio of about 1:1, and all of a sudden here it was more like 25:1.

I had my share of odd experiences. Too many times I found something as casual as a smile to a slight acquaintance could lead to him deciding he was in love with me.

But I certainly didn't come to Caltech just for the ego trip of being suddenly desirable and well known. It's a serious kind of place, and I came for a serious reason: to get the best possible education in my field.

I became interested in science at a very early age when my father taught me some astronomy.



Clockwise from above: Marion Movius Nelson at her 1974 Caltech graduation; in a photo taken for then-president Harold Brown's 1970 Christmas card, with Rudy Castro, Debra Dison Hall (BS '74), and Rik Smoody; performing with the San Diego Follies in 2017 at the Lincoln Performing Arts Center; and with her 8-year-old granddaughter Lucy.

I entered high school having pretty much decided I'd be working toward a career in math or science, so I took all the courses I could in those fields. Many people, students and teachers alike, showed skepticism at my interest in a “man's field,” but I knew it was my thing.

Coincidentally, Caltech was going co-ed the same year I'd be starting college. I was shocked when Tech said they'd take me, but my friends were even more shocked that I would actually consider going there. They pictured a place where mad scientists work incessantly in their labs, where young Einsteins with thick glasses walk around spouting equations to each other. I did visit the campus before I committed myself, though, just to make sure they weren't right!

It was a long haul through that first year. I learned how to accept grades far lower than “A,” even though I studied easily five or six hours a day. There were many times I wondered why I was torturing

myself here when I could have been coasting along without any trouble at some other school. But I'd realize that there would be no point in that; I felt if I couldn't make it at the best place, I didn't belong in my field at all.

Well, I did make it. In a few months I'll have a Bachelor of Science degree in mathematics. Not only did I survive the ordeal of required courses like Chem 1, Physics 1, and Physics 2, but I managed to get some reasonable grades and to become a “mathematician.”

I've done a lot of hard work to get where I am right now. I've been exposed to some of the top minds in the world on a personal level. But what's most special to me is having been a pioneer who made it all the way through. Now we have about 100 girls at Caltech, in all four classes, and they're here to stay.

Read the full article at magazine.caltech.edu/post/marion-nelson