

RESIDENT FEATURE



Mary Lou Wirene Bates

Impacting the College Transition for 50 Years

BY JENNA CAPUTO
PHOTOS BY LAUREN HULL PHOTOGRAPHY & CONTRIBUTED BY THE BATES FAMILY



For many people, the college admissions process is stressful—finding the “perfect” school and hoping to do everything right to make it on their list—but for Mary Lou Wirene Bates, it’s fun! Working in college admissions may not have been her original goal, but it’s a passion she found along the way, and now, fifty years later, it has become a part of who she is.

Born in Schenectady, Mary Lou lived in Scotia until she was 12 years old. Her family then moved to Niskayuna. In elementary school, she attended Girl Scout camp at Hidden Lake for many years, and in high school, she often played tennis at the Central Park courts in Schenectady. During her college summers, she worked as a counselor and swimming instructor at the day camp in Clifton Knolls in Clifton Park and waitressed at the Van Dyck Restaurant in the Stockade. She has stayed very close with a group of high school friends, and even though they are now scattered all over the country, they still make time to come together, most recently all meeting for an overnight in Niskayuna this past August.

Mary Lou graduated from Mount Holyoke College in 1972, thinking she would probably go on to law school. While deciding where to go next, she received a note from the Director of Admissions at Mount Holyoke, letting her know about a job opportunity on the admissions staff there. “It involved lots of travel all over the country, working closely with the college’s national alumnae network, visiting high schools, and meeting with prospective students,” says Mary Lou. “I realized it was work I would love doing, at least for a couple of years.” She decided to take the position.

In the meantime, her relationship with her now husband, Bill, had taken a more serious turn. They had known each other in high school but they didn’t begin dating until after he had graduated from Lafayette College and Mary Lou was entering her senior year. They reconnected at the wedding of two mutual high school friends and dated over the next three years before marrying in 1974. At the time, Bill was finishing law school at Albany Law, and since Mary Lou would be moving back to the Capital District, she began looking for a college admissions position closer to home. Skidmore College in Saratoga had an opening, and Mary Lou signed on, eventually moving up the ranks to Director of Admissions and ultimately as Vice President and Dean of Admissions and Financial Aid—a position she has held for over 20 years until she retires this coming summer.

“Needless to say, much has changed in the world of college admissions over 50 years, and much has changed at Skidmore as well,” she muses. “When I arrived at Skidmore in 1974, we were on two campuses, still using a number of buildings on the ‘old campus,’ located off of Union Ave close to the racetrack. Applying to colleges was a far simpler and more straightforward process. Colleges were just beginning to create promotional materials such as a viewbook with general information about the college and simple pictures of campus and students. Prior to that, the only info available from a college was the course catalogue, and you needed to visit campus to get any info beyond that. In 1975, the Common Application was created enabling students to fill out a common application form and submit it to other colleges who were Common Application members. And in 1983, the first US News rankings were published, which prompted colleges to begin investing in marketing and promotion of their schools. And that really marks the event that began the transformation of college admissions into a big-time industry.”

Since then, the admissions process has continued to evolve and has become continuously more competitive and pressurized as the applicant pools increase. “Unfortunately, the process of looking at colleges and figuring out what that next step after high school should look like is today for too many students a negative, anxiety-filled experience, rather than the exciting and hopeful journey of exploration and decision-making that it could and should be,” Mary Lou laments. The pandemic obviously forced all colleges to expand virtual information and programming, which created more inclusive opportunities for students and families to access the information they needed. Luckily, many of these changes have continued despite the return to in-person learning on campus.

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As with other selective schools, Skidmore evaluates candidates holistically, looking at a variety of factors like: solid academic preparation and achievement over all four years and across the breadth of academic disciplines; how a candidate has invested their time outside of the classroom through athletics, clubs, community service, jobs, or home responsibilities; recommendations from teachers and counselors; personal interviews; the essay/personal statement; and ways in which the student might be a great match with the academic and co-curricular opportunities the college offers. Standardized testing is now optional. "Our research showed that it offered very little predictive value of how a student will do at Skidmore beyond what we assess from the student's academic record," says Mary Lou.

Her advice for college-seeking students to best prepare for the admissions process is to answer a few questions: What would you like to happen over the next four years? What are you excited to study? What activities intrigue you? What academic setting/size feels most comfortable? How far from home do you want to be, and do you prefer an urban, suburban, or rural setting? "Students need to figure out the answers to these questions as they do their research on schools and hopefully get to visit campuses," says Mary Lou. "It is an iterative process, not something you figure out in a week of visits. Perhaps one of the most important things is to have an open mind throughout the process."

Outside of campus, Mary Lou is involved in other aspects of the admissions/higher education arena. She was a NYS delegate to the National Assembly of the National Association of College Admission Counseling (NACAC); President of the NYS Association of College Admission Counseling (NYSACAC); co-founder of the NYSACAC Summer Institute on College Admissions; appointed to the National Admissions Practices Committee of NACAC; member of the University Recognition Task Force (CURT) of the International Baccalaureate Organization (IBO) for the Americas from 2003-2013; received the NYSACAC College Admissions Counselor Distinguished Service Award and the President's Award; elected twice to the Board of Directors of the Common Application from 2002-2003 and a second term on the Board from 2014-2018.

One aspect of her admissions work that she loves is the opportunity to travel all over the country *and* internationally. Mary Lou has so far visited high schools in 43 of the 50 states and in 15 countries outside of the US and looks forward every year to visiting the places and other counselors who have become friends through the years.



Mary Lou and Bill have three sons who all graduated from Niskayuna High School and then from Skidmore: Jeff (Skidmore Class of '00), Ben ('03), and Alex ('10). Jeff and his wife, Holly, live in Rye, NY with their two daughters, Pepper (9) and Frances (6). Ben and his daughter, Kensley (11) live here in Niskayuna and Kensley comes for dinner one night each week with Bill and Mary Lou. Alex and his wife, Emily (Skidmore Class of '11) live in Riverdale, NY with their son Luke (10 months). Ben works at Four Winds Hospital in Saratoga and often plays in local golf tournaments. Jeff and Alex both followed their mom's footsteps into admissions/college counseling careers. Jeff first worked in Admissions at NYU before transitioning into college counseling at Rye Country Day School, where he is now the Director of College Counseling. Alex worked in admissions for Lafayette College before joining the college counseling staff at the Horace Mann School in Riverdale. "It has really been fun to share the world of admissions and college counseling with both of them!" Mary Lou says. Bill is an attorney practicing in Schenectady, focusing mainly on real estate law since 1975.

Outside of the admissions world and family responsibilities, Mary Lou cooks, reads, indoor gardens, and backyard bird watches. She has thriving indoor plants, including an avocado bush she started herself from a pit and a number of orchids. She loves to cook Ina Garten's recipes and is known for her chili. When reading for herself, Mary Lou enjoys fiction, mysteries, history, and biographies. But her favorite is to read with her grandchildren. During the pandemic they read regularly together through FaceTime and have continued the practice. They have been working on *The Boxcar Children's Mystery Series* and have just completed Book #42.

Anyone can see her love for her family, but most people do not know that Mary Lou was at Woodstock in the summer of 1969, looking "a bit out place in a preppy Villager sundress and matching sandals." She went with a friend after purchasing tickets a month before (\$7 each). They both had summer jobs, so they bought their

tickets for Saturday only. "During that week when coverage was all over the news, I wondered when my parents were going to make the connection between what they were seeing on TV and where I was going to Saturday. Eventually, they did make the connection, but I successfully persuaded them that it was safe for me to go. By Saturday the rain had ended, and we set off from Niskayuna. However, the NYS Thruway was closed and so we had to exit the Thruway and make our way there on local roads using a NYS map. We finally arrived and parked a long, long walk away from the site of the festival. I remember walking along the road past lots of houses with many residents outside taking it all in. I remember stopping at one house with a friendly-looking couple outside and politely asking if I could use their telephone to make a collect call to my parents to let them know we had arrived safely. They couldn't have been more gracious inviting me in to use the phone. The groups I remember seeing that day were John

Sebastian, Santana, Grateful Dead, Janis Joplin, and The Who."

Mary Lou is looking forward to traveling for fun after retirement, hoping to first hit up Alaska and the Grand Canyon. In the meantime, she and Bill love visiting the Adirondacks, spending time with friends on upper Saranac Lake and traveling to see their out-of-town grandchildren. She's so proud of her family and her 50 years of working with our nation's students, filling a role in helping them to

successfully navigate the transition process and hopefully diminishing some of the stress and anxiety for them along the way, as well as witnessing the growth of Skidmore into the diverse and accomplished school community it is today.

Mary Lou's mantra in life is one that can help not only her students, but all of us as we face each life challenge that comes our way—"When confronted with a challenge or tough situation, ask 'What are my choices?'" she advises. "I don't focus on those aspects of the situation that I cannot impact or change, but rather, identify the real choices that are available to me and take it from there." ☺



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