

In Appreciation of the Inestimable President Phil Stone

By now, the tale is almost apocryphal. Even so, it never gets old. Phillip C. Stone arrived on the silent and empty campus of Sweet Briar College on July 2 in 2015 with a suitcase, a formidable will, and more than one man's usual allotment of intelligence, experience, and powers of persuasion ... and not much else.

No faculty. No students. No administration. No board of trustees. Fifty-four days later, he had reassembled many of the devastated faculty and staff, put in place an administrative team, including several alumnae who left homes and careers elsewhere to step in and serve the college, and several retired former administrators who agreed to return to help put their shoulders to the wheel, and 236 students, for whom Sweet Briar was the only college they had ever been able to imagine for themselves.

Alongside Phil, a wholly new board of trustees and an army of alumnae recommitted to the future of the college. On August 27, 2015 – against all odds – Sweet Briar College reopened for business. Phil likes to talk about miracles; what he accomplished in those early weeks was indeed miraculous. It was also the measure of this good and kind and gentle but very determined man. In his inaugural address on March 4, 1865, Abraham Lincoln urged the American people to “bind up the nation's wounds” at the close of the Civil War. When Phil, a scholar of Lincoln's remarkable life and accomplishments, arrived on campus – alone, determined to overturn the chaos into which the college had been thrown, to imagine a path forward, to “bind up the wounds” inflicted by the attempt to close the college – he did so with qualities Lincoln would have admired: “with malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right.”

Now, nearly two years later, Phil hands the reins of the college to his successor, President-elect Meredith Woo, who will inherit the legacy Phil leaves – a legacy of hard work and generosity and kindness and faith – and help shape the future Phil forged: alumnae united as never before behind their college; faculty and staff whose faith and love for the college have stood the most difficult of tests; students now on their own paths through and eventually beyond these beautiful 3,200 acres, these seminar rooms and labs, these fields and lecture halls, this light-filled library.

Here are a few of the countless images we will remember: Phil and his loyal and gracious wife, Cherrill, opening Sweet Briar House again, welcoming the community into its lovely rooms. Phil walking – swiftly, he’s a fast walker -- across campus in his pink and green striped tie, smiling – always smiling -- stopping to speak to those he passes, rejoicing in a lovely day. Phil in the dining hall, eating lunch at a table surrounded by students. Phil on the sidelines of a field hockey or soccer game. Phil in his office, usually just after sunrise (and sometimes before), at his computer or with his head bent over papers on his desk, looking up sometimes to wave from his window at other early risers out for morning walks or arrival at work. Phil in airport after airport, city after city, town after town, living room after living room, reaching out to alumnae to thank them, to encourage them, to listen to stories of Sweet Briar’s past and to recount its promising future. Phil with a proverbial twinkle in his eye, a kind word, a patient ear, a ready laugh.

If you ask those who have worked with him for the last two years for a few words that best describe him, you hear a wonderful echo: wise, they say, again and again. A man of integrity, of dedication, of intelligence, of warmth and insight and vision and sincerity, a man who can be trusted. A man who is funny and also measured. A man of principle and optimism. A gentleman. A mensch. A man so certain of the rightness of his mission that he gave tirelessly and joyfully – though not without sacrifice – one hundred percent of those excellent qualities not just some of the time, but all of the time. The Sweet Briar community owes its birth to Indiana Fletcher Williams, who believed in the power and necessity of a woman’s education. The college owes its rebirth to Phillip Stone, who, like the great American statesman he so admires, understood what Lincoln understood, that “the best way to predict the future is to create it.”

Under the gentle, unwavering care of this one modest, unassuming, forthright man, we have been – as C.S. Lewis wrote – “surprised by joy.” In gratitude and with admiration and love, we send Phillip Stone back to his patient and loving wife and family, back to a retirement (again) of rest and renewal and grand adventure for many years to come, years in which we hope and trust he will never be a stranger to Sweet Briar and all who love her but instead a frequent visitor and beloved friend.

**Presented on 22 April 2017 by Teresa Tomlinson on behalf of the trustees,
faculty, staff and students of Sweet Briar College**