



## Phyllis Yvonne Atwater

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ATWATER--Phyllis Yvonne. She was born on November 4, 1947. She died peacefully in her home in New York City on December 12, 2009. Phyllis is survived: by her husband, John R. Ernst; her mother, Thelda E. Phillips Atwater; and her sister Bertha L. Atwater. Phyllis was born and raised in Memphis, TN.

Precocious and brilliant, she entered Vassar College at age 16 and graduated with honors with a degree in Mathematics in 1968. She then went on to obtain her Master's degree in Mathematics from Boston University.

Post graduation, Phyllis helped create Roxbury Community College. It was also at this time that she met and then married John on December 28, 1972. As Phyllis continued her academic career she won a fellowship from the Ford Foundation. She then became a Danforth Foundation Dissertation Fellow at the New School, where she worked on her doctoral dissertation, "The Difference between Depreciation Charges and Replacement Costs."

In the 1980s Phyllis was President of R2B2 (Resource Recovery of the Borough of the Bronx). Subsequent to this position she then held a number of high-level state and city government positions, both in New York and Massachusetts. Most recently Phyllis served as the Director of the Certification Unit for the Minority and Women-Owned Business Enterprise program.

Phyllis was also very active in the community. She was on the board of directors of the Girls and Boys Project and the Scenic Hudson Foundation. Most recently, Phyllis was a founding member of the Psi Lambda Omega Brooklyn chapter of the Alpha Kappa Alpha sorority.

Phyllis was a woman of great intellect, warmth, humor, wit, insight, and commitment. She touched everyone she knew and will be missed by her immediate family, her uncles, aunts, cousins and friends. Thank you Phyllis, for sharing your life with us!

In lieu of flowers, donations can be made to The Atwater Foundation (located at 64 Fulton Street Suite 404, New York, NY 10038-2755). The foundation is a non-profit organization started in her honor, and will support scholarship in the areas of education, economics and the environment. Please be sure to join Phyllis's family and friends at 6pm on March 17, 2010 for a celebration of her life at Trinity Church in New York City. For more information please contact the toll free number, 1-866-271-4900 or email [celebration@pipeline.com](mailto:celebration@pipeline.com).

## **. . . then there were five**

In September, 1964, there were six freshmen housed in the very small first floor corridor of Davison. We six have remained friends for all these 45 years. Every few years we have come together, sometimes at Vassar during formal '68 reunions, sometimes informally at each others' homes. No matter where or when, no matter the absolute difference in our outer backgrounds, we have communicated intimately and lovingly. Now Phyllis is gone. We five who remain mourn the loss of Phyllis Atwater, the youngest of us.



**Davidson Six, 1984 in Maine: True, Phyllis, Tammy, Debby, Shirley, Anne**

### **True Fezer Wolff**

Phyllis and I had a challenging beginning in Davison 109, one which we met with the full force of our fierce individual temperaments. We were roommates again in Cambridge, Massachusetts, along with Peter Lilienthal, a student at Harvard Business School. One night he escorted us, one on each arm, to a formal event at the school. Phyllis was completely serious and dignified. In 1972 I baked Phyllis and John's wedding cake. Over the years Phyllis and I became more and more comfortably friends, as we welcomed each other to our homes in New York City and Connecticut. It was of special value to me that Phyllis took the time to truly know each of my three children. I will miss her every day forever.

### **Tammy Kaye Kraig**

Phyllis Atwater was such a critical part of my Vassar time; perhaps I hadn't realized how much... From the moment I passed under the welcome sheet fluttering from the second

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story of Davison and found my room on the first floor until the day we graduated, the six first floor freshman were linked: destined to be friends and helpmates throughout our lives. Phyllis seemed to be the sophisticated one. Her questions about, say, a boyfriend, always helped me clarify my own thoughts. Her easy-going manner put worries into perspective. She was a very beautiful person — inside and out — with her wonderful smile. We were blessed to have her as our friend.... She was a part of my young, innocent, happy days. A big part. I will miss her very, very much. She was so confident, capable, and positive. So willing to do things that other people were afraid to do. She had so many friends. Everyone saw her good heart — and her fabulous smile. The world truly is a less bright place without her. She was a major part of our growing into adulthood years.

### **Debby Holbrook**

...when I think of young Phyllis arriving at Vassar on a train in 1964 — a young thing, fresh out of Memphis. How frightening that must have been! I always had the utmost respect for her taking that huge step. She is truly part of our history and ourselves. Phyllis was whip smart and very independent. How strange it must have been to be black at Vassar in 1964 with all the upheaval around race issues in America at the time. She gave us all a lot of slack for whatever limitations we may have demonstrated in this regard and I think that is because we were all truly friends.

### **Shirley Wiltshire**

What touched me most deeply about Phyllis was her tremendous courage when she first arrived at Vassar. I was immensely impressed that this 16 year old young black woman in a white woman's world greeted everyone she met those first few days with a huge smile saying "Hi my name is Phyllis." It was my impression that she literally knew everyone in our class by name within the first few months. Throughout our four years together in college she continued to display this outgoing open-hearted friendliness to everyone she met. I've never seen anything like this. I was awed by her intensity and intellect and her ability to bounce back from the trials of her life. She was a vibrant force.

Phyllis and I shared an apartment for two years in Boston after graduating and supported each other as we entered our young adult years. ...We kept in touch over the years and she has been a beloved part of me for all these years. I will never forget her. I feel like part of my soul is missing.

### **Anne Witting Kuhn**

It is so sad to lose a friend who has been a part of our self identity, who helped us to grow up and to see the world in new ways. ...Do you remember the heated discussions we all had, at the Dutch. ... God, it seems so long ago and we have all changed so much over the years. But our friendships have remained in a special place in my heart. I always know that if I tried to explain something to any one of you, you would listen and you would try to understand, even if you totally disagreed. And that the discussion would be a good one, and one I would think about a lot. That is rare in this world and may be the reason that we have all connected again and again over the years.

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## **“JB” Janet Binder Houts**

When Phyllis Atwater came into a room, she took all the air out of it. The wattage on the lights increased ten fold, and the exuberant, giggly girl attracted all the attention. You knew she was there. You wanted to know her.

My memories of Phyllis started at Vassar, but we became closer when we both went to Boston University for our graduate degrees—hers in math, mine in law. I had started out being a math major, but it got the best of me, and I truly admired her brains. My dad wanted to hire her to teach math at Whittier College in California when he became the president of the college, but she didn't want to leave the east. Or, more accurately, John Ernst, who became her husband.

She used to come to my apartment for dinner. We both had a love of Motown music and she taught me some great dance moves. She told me I danced pretty well for a white kid and kidded that she thought I had some black in me, which I felt was truly a compliment about my (then) dancing abilities. I would feed her dinner and she said how she loved coming to my place for dinner because she “always wanted a white maid.” I thought that was a riot. We talked honestly about race, since I was from the northeast and was truly naive about the rest of the country. She told me stories I literally did not believe about what it was like to grow up in Memphis in the 1950's and '60's. Separate drinking fountains? Seating in a separate balcony at the movies? Surely it wasn't true! I made her tell me over and over. I was astounded. I asked her what she did about it, I asked her why she didn't rebel, I asked her thousands of questions, which she always answered calmly and reasonably.

The late sixties were also the days of the black militant movement, which we sometimes forget. There were two such black militants in my law school who confronted me one day, asking why I was friends with “that girl” (Phyllis) and asked me what I wanted out of the relationship. They didn't believe we were really friends, for some reason. They would follow me into the library and stare at me. They warned me not to see her or be friends with her any more. I doubt if I ever told Phyllis about that confrontation. If I had told her, I am sure her reaction would be just her usual calm and reasonable reaction.

Although Phyllis stayed on the east coast and I moved to the west coast, I will always remember and cherish our friendship. We lost contact, and I wanted to regain that contact at the next reunion. Sadly, that day will not come. I miss her with all my heart.

## **Ruth Kirk Baacke**

I can hear Phyllis' lilting laugh—she had such a wonderful sense of humor! The image of Phyllis walking around campus wearing the lining of her trench coat over her clothes makes me chuckle! She did her own thing without question. And what a sharp wit she had...and oh those gorgeous legs! What a great woman; what a loss to the world.

## **Joyce Solomon Moorman**

I guess I never thought my relationship with Phyllis would ever end, certainly not so soon. I met Phyllis at Vassar in 1964. There were six African American women in the freshmen class. The six of us at Vassar kept in touch but pursued different interests and majors. Friendships at Vassar I found often were centered around dorm life. Phyllis was in Davidson and I was across the quad in Strong. Phyllis and I would occasionally have

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dinner together and converse when we met randomly on campus. But we never had any classes together or participated in the same campus organizations. I remember that Phyllis sang in the Vassar choir and was a member of the African-American student organization.

After Vassar we lost contact. I did not attend any Vassar reunions until the 25th. I spoke to Phyllis then and found out that she was living in Manhattan. She earned a Masters degree in mathematics from Boston University, married John, matriculated in a Ph. D

program in economics at the New School and worked in environmental programs. But it was not until the 35th reunion, when I discovered that we were both working in lower Manhattan in close proximity, that we decided to get together for lunch.

That summer **Gene Furman Wesley**, another of the six African American women of the class of Vassar'68, came for barbeque from New Jersey and Phyllis joined us. At lunch in the Fall of 2005, I mentioned to Phyllis that I had decided to join a group of Brooklyn women preparing to become an AKA interest group. To my surprise I found out that Phyllis was an AKA and that both our mothers were AKAs along with various other relatives. Phyllis was inducted into AKA our senior year at Vassar at a regional meeting, but she was never active in the organization. I was inducted into AKA in 1971 when I spent a year in my hometown teaching high school math. The following year while teaching music at a predominantly Black college in Tennessee, I became disillusioned by the hazing of the undergraduate initiates by the local college chapter. For that reason and financial concerns when I returned to New York City to pursue further graduate study, I did not contact any New York City chapters. So we both had been inactive and non-financial for years. Phyllis asked to attend a meeting and immediately decided that she wanted to join the group. Phyllis first decided to chair the college application scholarship committee, then she became assistant recording secretary and finally recording secretary as we became an official AKA chapter in February 2009. In the Spring of 2009 she also became chair of the audit committee. I am the chapter financial secretary and I must admit that I did not really understand my job until Phyllis became chair of the audit committee. Phyllis really loved the group, which was shown by the fact that she was more active in the group this past year than I have ever been. She will certainly be missed by Psi Lambda Omega. At the time of her death she was revamping our small college application scholarship program to become a full-fledged college preparatory scholarship and college scholarship program. I am sure that Psi Lambda Omega will establish her scholarship program in her memory. I will work with the program as I did with the smaller college application scholarship.

Phyllis at the time of her death was working as the Director of Certification in the minority and women vendor certification program of New York City's Small Business Administration. At the time that we began having lunch in 2003 Phyllis was working with New York City's Unemployment Division where at one time she was an Assistant Commissioner. We would discuss our job problems when we would travel together to and from Psi Lambda Omega meetings. She and John moved to Battery Park City in 2004. But this Fall she was planning her retirement. She planned to return to Memphis and live in the family home. She said that John had agreed to this. Phyllis had a very successful life and career. My only regret is that she did not get to retire as she had planned and return to Memphis.

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## Elizabeth Klingaman

**Lucey Bowen** has suggested that I write something about **Phyllis Atwater** for our remembrance page. I was so shocked to find out about her death this morning, when I followed a *Facebook* link to the Vassar page.

I was surprised to learn how young Phyllis was! The general line was that black girls had to be very bright to cope (hence the paucity of numbers) but the idea that they would come as accelerated students was out of ken.

We first saw each other at our 25<sup>th</sup> (when she explained she was into recycling) and met again at the 35<sup>th</sup> reunion, and I remember, when we had that session in the chapel with brief potted biographies, that she was one of several who rejoiced in a Vassar friendship with someone she had met through me. The problem with that is that I was always left out of those loops.

However, I live in England and pay the price philosophically.

Phyllis and I were unexpected roommates in our senior year. That in itself is a little vignette. The Drew would not give me a room because there was a chance I might get a “campus job” as an au pair to a faculty family. The Drew was not disposed to give me the job, as I was not on scholarship, even though we needed the money, but offered it to another girl who could only come back with such funding, and who then did not come back. The Drew however was not one to back down and as I got to do my senior recital as a result of this idiocy, I did not complain a lot. This is the reason, though, that I assigned my boxes, at the end of my junior year, to the Drew’s office.

At the beginning of my senior year, I reported to the Drew’s office and was given a new room number. I had a room which had been a pair with the one Phyllis was in. We had a connecting door. Alas, I forget her story, which was probably equally good. We knew each other slightly from choir and enjoyed each other’s company during the year.

In the spring, after Martin Luther King’s assassination, there was a lot of hype about how you had to make allowances for black people as they were all brought up by single mothers on welfare, etc. I wondered if this were really true, so with great trepidation, I gingerly approached Phyllis with this question. Up to that point, I had known nothing about her family, although I did know that she came from Memphis, as my good friend, **Sara Widdicombe**, also came from Memphis and I did know the girls from Memphis, who also included **Katherine Hoagland** and **Mayhill Anderson**, famous now of course. Well, you can imagine how Phyllis roared with laughter at the notion that she came from a single parent slum family. Not a bit. She had a father and mother who were still married and she was one of two girls. Both her parents were teachers, I seem to recollect, and her father was also a pastor, if memory is accurate after so long.

What a wonderful and modest person she was. Her sense of life’s rich comedy was her great gift to us all. It was a privilege to know her and a great blessing in our racially divided society to have her in our class.

## Scenic Hudson mourns loss of board member

Some people who enjoy Scenic Hudson parks and other work we do to protect the valley's wondrous landscapes may not have heard of **Phyllis Atwater**, who passed away on Dec. 13. But all who treasure the valley owe her a debt of thanks -- as Scenic Hudson surely does -- for her quiet generosity and intelligence.

As a Scenic Hudson board member, Phyllis Atwater shared her business savvy and keen understanding of how to connect communities, particularly urban ones, with land preservation and environmental issues as well as a joy of nature. We at Scenic Hudson mourn her passing and express heartfelt condolences to her husband John and other family members.

In her professional life, she spent 10 years in New York City government helping create business opportunities for women and minorities. Prior to that she worked on state environmental programs in Massachusetts and New York.

A native of Memphis, Tenn., and a graduate of Vassar College, she once described her affection for this region. Her words explain why it meant so much for her to impart this passion to others.

“It was love at first sight, driving the thruway of the Mid-Hudson Valley one hot, dry August day in 1964. Miles and miles of deciduous trees showing off in the yellow, orange, red, purple hues of late summer. And then suddenly, the Hudson River in cooling, calming greens and blues and aqua. A far cry from the sparseness along the muddy Mississippi, soon abandoned for life among historic villages, town squares of American legend, facades standing for over a century, and so many olden spires of peace.”

<http://www.scenichudson.org/aboutus/pressroom/phyllis-atwater>

Colleen Burke attended the memorial service and writes comments on our [Facebook page](#)