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CENTERPIECE

Something gained; something lost

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Left, artist Jennifer Cecere, an Abbot Academy alumna, '69, cuts paper doilies at the Abbot 50 Bazaar earlier this month in recognition of the all-girls Abbot Academy which, 50 years ago, merged with PA to form a co-ed school. Cecere's sculptures are displayed on the campus through July 31.

Terry Date/Staff photos



ANDOVER — The two friends sit at a long table in the buzzing Phillips Academy field house, cutting paper doilies and talking with the familiar comfort they first discovered more than a half century ago just down the road at what was then the all-girls Abbot Academy.

Artist Jennifer Cecere and Dr. Deborah Marum Pressman are here at the Abbot 50 Bazaar — art, music, games, discussion and food at the new Snyder Center in early May.

It's part of a year-long celebration. Fifty years ago, Abbot Academy and Phillips Academy merged. The anniversary offers a chance to think about girls' and women's education: "Abbot & Andover at 50: Then, Now, Next."

Cecere, commissioned by the Academy for the "Women's Work" project, made two outdoor sculptures for the 50th. The aluminum works draw on the doily motif. One, a large piece, hangs on the Addison Gallery of American Art exterior. The other is a bench in the Abbot (Academy) Circle. The art, up through July 31, recognizes the unsung knitting, needlework, crocheting that women did anonymously.

Back at the doily table, Cecere and Pressman, who practices internal medicine, recall the time, in March 1968, that they had the moxie to approach the Abbot Academy head mistress and convince her to suspend classes for two days.

The days, they explained, would be for self exploration and hands-on activities. The head mistress said, "Yes." Students, secretaries, cafeteria workers and other staff made bread, threw pottery, painted. Revolution was in the air.

"Nobody can believe we did that, and we can't believe we did that," Cecere says.

"We felt so excited by the idea that this was going to be accepted," says Pressman, who grew up locally, and whose father's family owned a hosiery mill in Lawrence on the top of the historic Everett Mills.

Meanwhile, on this Sunday afternoon, Cinco de Mayo, a couple young students wander to the table and ask, “What’s a doily?”

A student jazz band plays in the distance. PA kids mill about the field house and sit at tables socializing, eating corn dogs, ice cream and more healthy fare.

Cecere is not sure about the extent to which the Abbot legacy of female education survives at Phillips Academy.

“The longer I am here the sadder I become because I am staying on the Abbot campus and there are no students there,” she says.

At the time of the merger, a lot of Abbot women were very angry.

Abbot was a different place, more liberal, not old boy, and perhaps more diverse, say Cecere and Pressman.

People, especially Elaine Finbury, did what they could to maintain the buildings and some of the Abbot traditions including being curious, social, active, and walking and looking closely at the world around us.

Finbury, of North Andover, came to Abbot Academy as a day student from Haverhill in the late 1960s, class of ‘68, and discovered a place where students were free to be themselves.

“For me, it was freeing because I went to school with really talented girls,” Finbury said in an earlier interview. “All of them were smart in their own way, and nobody felt inhibited by being smart.”

Abbot prepared her for a lifetime of developing historic properties and, early on, brought her back to Abbot on a rescue mission to preserve the place where she and thousands of girls got their high school education. Finbury’s organizing, research and perseverance

led to the deteriorating historic buildings' restoration.

“Elaine Finbury’s work on the Abbot Academy campus is important because it has ensured that the full history of Phillips Academy continues,” says Paige Roberts, director of archives and special collections at Phillips Academy.

That history includes three connected schools that have had a global impact — Phillips Academy, Andover Theological Seminary and Abbot Academy, she says.

Abbot was one of the first all-girls schools in the nation, and the former campus, thanks to the buildings' preservation, retains a sense of place in girls' education, Roberts says.

Cecere and Pressman and other Abbot alumnae at the bazaar talked with today’s students and were impressed with not just their intelligence and wide perspectives on our world but their willingness to get involved, to make positive contributions.

They talked to a Phillips student about the public art nonprofit he started that creates murals in the Boston area. They talked to another student who has researched the McKeen sisters, two influential Abbot women from the 19th century.

Philena McKeen, a longtime Abbot principal, put Abbot on the map, leading a fundraising drive to build the campus.

Here among the students at Snyder on this Sunday is 11th grader Georgianna Harpole.

She is interested in the humanities and is researching “deep fakes” generated by artificial intelligence, often used by younger people as a way to bully people.

She has enjoyed mixing with the Abbot alumnae.

“I like anniversaries, they recognize the past,” she says. “We are young. We have a limited scope of time.”

She's glad to know about the Abbot campus and what came before her time here.

The alumnae would be heartened to know the Abbot legacy endures, encouraging young girls to cultivate their minds and selves and make the world a more connected place.

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