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Meet Virginia

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In the 1930s, between the time when the depression caused everyone to panic and the war caused everyone to worry, Virginia Schatz rode around the bustling city of Johnstown in her father’s new Chrysler Airflow. Life and time would take her places she never expected to see, doing things she never expected to do. She didn’t know that the man who developed the trigger mechanism for the atomic bomb would sweep her off her feet in just a few years, or that in less than a decade she would be on a remote island making donuts for lonely soldiers in the navy. At the time, Johnstown was a wonderful place to be.

While most teenage girls in the 1930s probably dreamed of being housewives or teachers, Virginia wasn’t afraid of dreaming big dreams. She set her sights on becoming a doctor. Her father owned his own medical practice in Johnstown and her mother helped him run it. Virginia also helped her father and went in on Saturdays and other evenings to talk to patients and answer phones. In the meantime, she was busy in high school, directing the choir and starring in all the plays. She was “Viola” in Twelfth Night and the leading lady in numerous other productions. She played piano and viola and sang.

All was not just work for Virginia in these prewar teenage years. Her family enjoyed traveling all over the county too. She and her three sisters and one brother traveled every year to Winona, Indiana for a Bible conference. Virginia always accompanied the voice teacher and the choir at the Bible conference, and one year she worked with Homer Rodehever, a “wonderful song leader and choir director” who was quite famous. Beyond the annual Bible conference, the seven members of the family traveled to places like Pike’s Peak, California and Vermont. They even took fishing trips to Canada, but Virginia would sit in the boat and read. Fishing, unlike music and drama, was not her thing.

When Virginia graduated from high school in the late 1930s, she set off for Albright College to pursue her lifelong dream of being a doctor. Unfortunately, she realized after her first semester that being a doctor was different from what she had been doing in her father’s office. “Unfortunately, in pre-med, you take math and chemistry,” she says, and these were just not her thing. While she was getting a “C” in chemistry and almost failing calculus, though, she was directing the choir and playing the piano. After a year at Albright in a field she hated, she realized her true calling was music, but she didn’t know what to do about it. Her father, tired of her indecisiveness,
enrolled her at Carnegie Tech. She auditioned and was accepted as a music education and piano double major.

Unlike the other students, Virginia enrolled late and had to walk around to each department to register for her classes. When she went to the math department to make sure that she could receive credit for the calculus class she finally passed at Albright, the professor couldn’t believe, at first, that she wanted credit for a D. Upon seeing that she was a fine arts student, though, the professor smiled and signed the form, delighted he would never have to see her in class. Virginia couldn’t have been happier. Carnegie Tech was already looking like a wonderful place.

Because she was late to enroll, Virginia also missed the deadline for living in the dormitory. She instead rented a room from the Hathaway family, who lived where Boss and McGill Halls currently stand on Margaret Morrison Street. The family had a daughter Virginia’s age named Jane and the two became close friends. Jane was friends with Vera Doherty (daughter of President Doherty) and the two belonged to a sorority. Virginia joined the same sorority.

In the early 1940s, CIT was a predominantly male institution. There were women in the Fine Arts school and in Margaret Morrison College, but they were still a minority. One would think that, because of this, the women would face strict rules. But for Virginia, who didn’t live on campus, the rules were a little more lenient. While she did have a curfew with the Hathaways, it was later than the curfew for the dormitory girls. But she was still under the control of Dean Green, the Dean of Women, who gave advice like “if you’re going somewhere in a car with a group of people and it’s so crowded that you have to sit on your date’s lap, make sure you put newspaper down first.” They were extremely careful with the women on campus, but not all of them paid strict attention to the rules. Virginia, it seems, took them with a grain of salt.

Virginia, while busy academically, was also busy socially. She was in all the Fine Arts productions, played viola in the orchestra, was in the choir, and still found time for Mortarboard, the Women’s Clan and the sophomore honorary. She was a member of the YWCA and organized an effort on campus to get students to knit scarves and socks for the people in France who were suffering because of the war. If there was something going on on campus, chances were good that Virginia was either in it or organizing it.

Somehow, in her almost nonexistent free time, she had time to date. For a while, she dated different fraternity brothers off and on, but she finally began to see a man in her sophomore honorary. His last name was Schatz and the two dated “hot and heavy,” according to Virginia, from January to December of 1942, when he went to Los Alamos to work on the atom bomb. They didn’t see each other after that. Virginia graduated in 1943 and joined the Red Cross.

As a member of the Red Cross recreation division, Virginia was sent to Terciera, a small island eight miles around that was part of the Azores. She was stationed at a naval air base there and she and the woman she worked
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with had their own hut on the base. The base was used for air rescue and submarine detection and, unfortunately, they never had any rescues and they never saw any submarines. It was a hard place for soldiers to be because they saw no combat and felt like they weren’t really doing anything. Virginia’s job was to keep them entertained. They offered games and other diversions for the men. Virginia’s main job was making donuts. She had a machine that she would use everyday to make donuts for the men at the base. She and the other Red Cross volunteer were the only women on the base, so they would organize dances with the army base and English units on the island. Donuts, dances, and games kept her occupied until the war was over. Then she went back to Pittsburgh.

Virginia was involved with the YWCA throughout college and after she served with the Red Cross she returned to Pittsburgh as a program director for Y-teens. She was also the city-wide music director for the YWCA. She did folk singing and music with kids, Y-teens and grown adults. It was also at this time that Mr. Schatz resurfaced in her life. Before she returned to Pittsburgh, and after being out of touch with him for a year and a half, she sent him a letter, telling him that she would be returning to the Pittsburgh area. The day she moved in, he showed up with a fraternity brother and helped her move in. He was pursuing a doctorate at CIT. They began to date, and in 1948, the two were married.

Not long after they were married Virginia had her first child and stopped working away from home. She taught piano lessons at her home and, at one time, had 50 students. At three dollars a lesson, she was able to make a nice sum of money while still being at home to care for the children. Mr. Schatz first taught at Carnegie Mellon and then moved into the administration of the university. They had two children and when they were old enough and in school, Virginia began teaching music to students at the Western Pennsylvania School for the Deaf.

Teaching music to deaf children was a challenge for Virginia, but one she enjoyed immensely. She taught them using the vibrations the instruments created. Her efforts in this area resulted in papers that she presented as far away as Germany and Japan. Virginia supervised the entire arts department at WPSD and she included such programs as Drama and Modern Dance. She was a pioneer in the area of teaching music to the deaf, and retired after 28 years of service to them.

Retirement does not mean that Virginia has stopped being involved. She still works for WPSD, but as a volunteer. She has also been a faithful volunteer at Carnegie Mellon. Her husband, who recently passed away, spent his entire career at CMU. Virginia was never far away. To the two of them “Carnegie Mellon was just home.” She has produced videos for the CMU recruitment program, along with the video about the mural on the second floor of the University Center. Virginia has always been involved with the Women’s Association, a group for the wives of faculty and staff and, recently, women faculty and staff themselves. They have social events
together and present scholarships to students. Virginia has been a Reunion Giving Class Agent and is serving on the Alumni Board. She is also instrumental in fundraising for the music department.

Virginia still loves to travel, but not by car anymore. She prefers trips to Spain or Ireland, places she never saw when she was a girl growing up in Johnstown. Traveling alone is never much fun, so she takes her 17 year old granddaughter with her. At home, she goes to the symphony and plays piano for elderly men and women at a personal care home. She performs with the alumni association of her music fraternity and takes aerobics for people with arthritis. She never stops.

In many ways, the woman everyone sees now, who is more than 70 but not quite 80, is still the teenager in her father’s new Chrysler. Virginia Schatz does not look old. She doesn’t get tired of talking to people. She meets friends for dinner and complains that her knees are starting to slow her down a little, but you could never tell. Her blue eyes sparkle in a face that is wrinkled, but still youthful when it smiles. Her clothes are conservative, yet fashionable. If asked, anyone who knows her will say that Virginia is spunky. She’s Virginia. She’s a mother, a grandmother, a wife who lost her husband, a fund-raiser, a volunteer, a Red Cross donut maker who served in World War II. She’s a teacher, a churchgoer, a strong member of the community, a musician and a terrible math student. She is all of these things, but above all, she is still the girl she used to be in the 1930s, after the depression made everyone panic and before the war made everyone worry. She is cruising through life in her father’s Chrysler Airflow. Virginia Schatz is not old.