

News

Woman, 59, inducted into Greek society at Wesleyan University

Wednesday, May 5, 2010 12:32 PM EDT

By JULIE ANNE RANCOURT, Press Correspondent

MIDDLETOWN — Fifty-nine-year-old Jill Hunting was welcomed into the Alpha Delta Phi Society Saturday at Wesleyan University. But her initiation actually marked the ending of a story that began more than 45 years ago in

Vietnam.

Upon graduating from Wesleyan University in 1963, Hunting's brother, Peter, who was a member of Alpha Delta Phi, signed up to work for the International Voluntary Services (a prototype for the Peace Corps) and traveled to Vietnam to help dig wells and teach the Vietnamese people. Sadly, on Nov. 12, 1965, he would become one of the first civilians killed as the American troop presence intensified.

Hunting learned of her brother's death by overhearing a phone call that her father received and the devastation that followed when he told her mother. She was 15 years old at the time. The rest of the nation was informed of the tragedy when Walter Cronkite announced it on the CBS Evening News.

What Cronkite said that night — that Peter was “led to his death by two Vietnamese, apparently Vietcong agents, who had posed as his friends,” — led Hunting to write a book, “Finding Pete: Rediscovering the Brother I Lost in Vietnam” (Wesleyan University Press, October 2009).

Hunting had a natural curiosity about the nature of Peter's death, but it was not discussed within the family.

In the book, Hunting recounted, “Silence in the face of grief made it harder for me to bear, but eventually my curiosity and determination won out. I would venture beyond the confines of my family with just one question: What happened to Pete?” In her attempt to find out what really led to her brother's death, Hunting started collecting letters that Peter sent home. Starting with 64 such correspondences in 2004, the author ended up with 175 with which to compile the book. She went from knowing five people who knew her brother to more than she could count.

“Although I did not talk about Pete, I thought about him a lot. I didn't know much about his life in Vietnam. It wasn't until his letters surfaced in 2004 and I studied them that I fully understood what he had been doing,” Hunting wrote.

Through her quest to honor her brother and her journey to understand his death, Hunting often visited Wesleyan and the Alpha Delta Phi Society, which became co-ed in 1992.

“My first visit to Alpha Delta Phi was in 1960, when Pete entered Wesleyan. I was just 8 years old. I've always had this special place in my heart for this house. I knew my brother was very fond of this place. And as an adult, I rediscovered it myself,” Hunting said.

The Alpha Delta Phi society was formed in 1832 to encourage free thought and to supplement a rigid classroom education.

Hunting herself comes from a long line of Yale University alumni, where her mother's male ancestors held a constant enrollment since 1701. Her great-great-grandfather, Middletown native General William Huntington Russell, founded the Yale secret society Skull and Bones, she said.

Last fall, the author was asked to be one of the Homecoming Weekend speakers at her brother's alma mater. While attending an Alpha Delta Phi banquet, she inquired if adults ever joined the literary society. This February, Hunting received a formal invitation to join the spring pledge class from Kim Ladd, a Wesleyan University freshman.

Hunting graciously accepted and was initiated last weekend. She believes that she is the chapter's oldest pledge.

The latest pledge was looking forward to traveling back east from her home in San Francisco-bay area in California for the occasion and getting to know her new brothers and sisters. She was especially excited to see one of her brother's best friends, Kirtland Mead, who made the trip from Cambridge, Mass., for the occasion.

"Over the years, this place has really become my own family, my own connection. And I really feel like although it came out last year, this is really the ending to my book."

URL: <http://www.middletownpress.com/articles/2010/05/05/news/doc4be0f049b4d98915423462.prt>

© 2010 middletownpress.com, a **Journal Register** Property