

# At the age of 51 — a room of her own

To write fiction, said Virginia Woolf, a woman must have money and a room of her own.

University sophomore Sue Roberts is halfway there. The bubbly creative writing major from Alaska may not be rich, but she does have a "single" at the University's nicest dormitory, the University Inn.

Not so strange, you say. So do many other undergraduates.

But unlike most UI residents, Roberts turns 51 Wednesday. She is the happily married mother of four grown children. And judging from some of the stares and remarks she's received from her younger neighbors, she is the oldest UI resident.

Yet, as for most of her dorm mates, college represents to Roberts a new, stimulating world which will open doors to other worlds, other opportunities.

Roberts felt isolated from the outside world in her tiny hometown of Anchor Point, Alaska. Her children had long since left the family nest. Her husband and she had built their dream home. What was there left for her to do there, she asked herself?

"I was at the end of a rope in a very provincial area," Roberts explains in her cheery seventh floor room that offers a splendid view of the Coburg Hills. Roberts has stripped the window of curtains to let sunlight — and the world — into her room. The action symbolizes her openness for learning, she says.

"There was a lack of stimulation, a lack of challenge (in Alaska). There were no juices raising my consciousness. I felt that I was really stagnating."

So after many discussions with her husband of 30 years, Roberts and he decided it was best if she pursued her dream of becoming a full-fledged writer. After being accepted to the University, Roberts sold her motorcycle, packed her much-used sewing machine but not her teddy bears, and headed south to Oregon.

"I need to have a give-and-take, student-teacher relationship," Roberts says. "I need to have someone help me (with writing) because it's been so long. Even though I feel like I've been doing good writing, I need to find out that a) I'm a good writer who needs help, or, b) I ought to take up interior decorating," says the curly-haired woman with her typical, unaccented humor.

"You put your whole self out there," she says of college. "It's like an audition. Here I am doing the best I can — and is it good enough? Is the competition too great?"

And there is one other question Roberts asks herself — can her marriage survive a nine month, 4,000 mile separation. "A huge bond of love" kept Roberts and her husband from even considering a permanent separation.

"I definitely want to come back (to the University) but there is one thing that is a great problem — my relationship with my husband. I'm going home for Christmas, but then we go into a six month separation and I don't want to make him comfortable without me."

Yet Roberts admits she's fallen head over heels for Eugene and the University.

"I'd like to be here forever. But if I'm blocked into this nine month time frame, I can deal with that."

Being on campus is like a country hick seeing city skyscrapers for the first time, she says. "You walk among the buildings and just keep looking upward." She admits the attitude sounds sophomoric, but after all, "I'm a sophomore so it fits me perfectly."

Yet her desire to learn still doesn't explain why a mature woman would want to live with sometimes childish, unruly, not to mention crude, teenagers.

After all, it's not like she's never cooked a meal, cleaned a house or paid the utility bills. But maybe that is precisely why dorm living appeals so much to her.

"I don't have to cook a meal. Everything in my life that I ever needed is taken care of for me. Someone handles my mail. I have a telephone. And once a week someone comes into this room and cleans the bathroom, vacuums the rug and leaves me clean sheets. And all I have to do is go to class and do the homework. I have Virginia Woolf's 'room of one's own.'"

But occasionally the habit of cleaning up after people, a habit indelibly etched into her psyche after years of raising her brood, overtakes Roberts.

"I'm very tempted to go out and sweep the street sometimes," she says. "And when I see someone drop a piece of paper in the hall, I even want to go over and say 'Hey, pick it up.'"

But Roberts doesn't want to be the resident "mother." A college friend suggested she place a sign outside her door, "Mom's Counseling Services." Yet that is exactly what she doesn't want to do. Because she likes people so much, Roberts fears being put in a vulnerable position if she opens her arms to every young adult who confides their problems to her. So the counseling sign remains down, she says.

Still, many UI residents automatically assume Roberts is

someone's mother and not a fellow neighbor. Just as she was about to sign her dorm contract, a young, attractive man named Jeff politely informed her it would be best if her daughter signed her own contract. Well, Roberts wouldn't be outdone.

"I said 'My daughter is at Stanford. I'm the one who is staying in this room. And he just about turned inside out when I said 'Go to your room, Jeff.'"

Then there are the stares. Some are pleasant stares, Roberts says, from people who probably have healthy relationships with their own mothers. These people "smile on the elevator when they see me," Roberts says.

And there are the stares of threatened residents who secretly fear Roberts may be an informant hired by their parents to spy on their every move. Those who fall into this group are rendered speechless by the sight of an older woman on their home turf. "And the look is 'What the hell are you doing here?' One girl said, 'Well, are you just here for fun?' And I just wanted to go into a long dissertation about how this is anything but fun, yet it is that, too," she says.

In a typical pose, Roberts gazes out her window at couples chatting among themselves, oblivious to their unseen observer. When she is not sleeping or studying, Roberts says she sits in front of her window with feet propped against the sill, green eyes intently watching a small segment of the world. Much of her writing evolves out of her window perch sessions.

"Since I've been here my mind has been a constant tape recorder. I'm always writing. And in the three weeks since I've been here, I think I could have written 20 stories."

Who knows. Maybe one of those stories will become the elusive "Great American Novel," Roberts jokes. And maybe not.

"Looking into the future I would like to go back to Anchor Point and still have this enthusiasm, this stimulation, this gee-whiz-wow feeling. The juices are flowing."

"And maybe nobody will ever hear of me again. So maybe the transcripts will go in the attic and I will leave them for my daughters and son, and for their daughters and sons. I can even live with that — but sure, I'd love to be a Virginia Woolf."

Stories by Joan Herman  
Photo by Dave Kao



Because she felt she was "stagnating" in Anchor Point, Alaska, writer Sue Roberts decided to go back to college — at the age of 51.

## Women in Transition offers help to older women

Much of the University's charm lies in its diverse student body. With students from all over the United States and the world, "education" becomes more than something acquired in a typical classroom.

Yet, when it comes to age, this University's population leans heavily toward the younger set. In fact, the average age of University students is a youthful 23 years-old.

But among the clean-scrubbed, smooth-skinned younger generation, walk an older — and perhaps wiser — group of students who bring a wealth of personal and professional experiences to the classroom.

"You'd be surprised how many older students there are at any University," says Anne Wyatt, who directs Women in Transition, a support group for older women students entering the University after a long absence.

WIT was created in 1979 by a group of older women students at the University who found the existing services catered mostly to younger students and therefore were inadequate for older students' needs.

Adult learners — especially women — now comprise the fastest growing student population, Wyatt says, and though their visibility may be low, their motivation level is "much higher" than that of most younger students.

Although only 29, Wyatt says she still feels "odd woman out" in a classroom of 18 and 19 year-olds. And unlike many younger, undirected students, the older student is there for a different reason, Wyatt says.

"I see school as a serious sort of thing. I'm not willing to pay a lot of tuition without being serious." Unlike many of her younger counterparts, Wyatt says she is "not a cup to be filled, but can pick and choose new ideas."

The recent trend toward older women returning to college is due in part to several reasons, Wyatt says. Undoubtedly, there are more options open to women today than there were 30 years ago. Many middle-aged women may have wanted to continue college when they were 20 years old, but dropped out to marry and raise a family, Wyatt says. Unlike men, women could not marry, have children and a career. So most opted for the traditional route.

Yet the desire to finish college has "always been in their hearts," Wyatt says. Once their children are grown, these women are "suddenly free and there is the validation of the world (to return to school). After a life of doing things for their husband and children, they find they can't fulfill themselves through another human being. You learn that

you've got to do what you've got to do for yourself."

For women who fit society's traditional feminine role, the adjustment from housewife and mother to college student and professional women is a radical one, Wyatt says.

"It's a major step," hence the need for services that cater to the "mature" student.

The WIT door in Room 336 EMU is almost always open, and inside, freshly brewed coffee and some friendly words can be found. WIT also holds brown-bag lunches every Monday at 11:30 a.m. at the Faculty Club (in the Collier House at the corner of 13th Avenue and University Street). The office also acts as a clearinghouse of job information and financial aid.

Besides the primarily social bent of services offered by WIT, the University's Lifelong Learning Services office has academic assistance for the older student returning to college after a lengthy hiatus. The LLS office assists older students in exploring career options, designing an academic program, recommending faculty advisors, assisting in registration and clarifying long- and short-range goals. For more information about the LLS office, call 686-3211 or drop by Room 164 Oregon Hall.

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