



CONVERSE

THE MISSION, THE VISION

by Daniel E. Harmon

Katie Landon couldn't wait to go to college. The problem for the Knoxville, TN, high school senior was that she "wanted to go everywhere." One of the greatest challenges of her life was selecting a short list of campuses to visit.



Once she narrowed down the options, though, her dilemma resolved itself with surprising ease. A trip across the mountains to Converse College in Spartanburg, and the decision was made. “When I came here, the spirit of community I saw was”—she casts up her palms in a gesture of awe—“overwhelming.”

Clearly, it still is. Landon exchanges sisterly greetings and encouragement with literally every other student she meets in the halls and on the grounds as she leads a campus tour. Nearing graduation with a double major in politics and English, she looks ahead to continued studies and her vocation with an even keener eagerness than she possessed four years ago. But beneath it is an undertone of sadness. In three months, Landon will be leaving, and Converse is a very hard community to leave.

Beth Farmer, Class of '96, found a novel way around the sadness that comes with graduation: She stayed. Farmer, a Lancaster native, took an event promotions job at Converse and now is the college's director of communications. Like others, she cites the strong bond that unites the stu-

dent body. She also praises where the college is heading these days. “This is one of the most exciting points in Converse history,” she says, enumerating an impressive array of expansion and renovation projects at the college. “Our campus master plan focuses on the whole quality of campus life. As we reach our goals, Converse is becoming a highly competitive institution in the market in which we want to compete.”

That market is diverse. Converse today offers some 40 majors, and 55 percent of its 750 undergraduate students elect to double or even triple major. The market is further diversified by graduate programs in music and education, which enroll about 800 graduate students.

Converse, like all learning institutions, has a history of pendulum swings between progress and comparative stagnation. Currently, the swing obviously is toward progress. “For the first time in 30 years we're in a building program,” observes Nancy Gray, who came to Converse as president in July 1999. With an exceptional background in collegiate development and community



While Converse long has been noted for its music studies and performance halls, an additional emphasis for the new century is on science and technology.

relations, the Texas native most recently had served as vice president of seminary relations at Princeton Theological Seminary.

“I wasn't looking for a presidency,” Gray reflects of her decision to take the helm at Converse. “I was very happy in Princeton, happy with my job and with my life. But when I came here, I was like a freshman student. I fell in love with it. I felt my skill set was what was needed—and the people are so wonderful. I felt immediately at home, and my family felt the same way.”

Already, both administrators and students speak excitedly of Gray's “vision” for Converse. Asked what that vision is, she explains, “After coming through a rocky period, we are literally building for the future, to position this college so that it will be as strong as it can possibly be as a residential liberal arts college for women, complemented by excellent graduate programs that will serve the needs of the community.”

Specifically, her vision has three parts. First, she wants to preserve and enhance the heritage the college has established. “Converse has produced strong leaders and thinkers since 1889. Our



graduates have expanded women's roles in society and significantly contributed to the advancement of our country," she says.

A major part of the school's heritage includes the Petrie School of Music and the education program. "Absolutely!" Gray affirms proudly when asked about the institution's identity as a "music college." "Our students go on to the best conservatories in the world. They become players in noted symphonies. They become educators. It remains one of our very finest programs. In fact, it is the nation's only comprehensive, professional school of music within a liberal arts college for women."

Gray also points out that the college has the only deaf education program in the state and one of the few art therapy programs in the Southeast. "We take seriously our responsibility to prepare teachers and education leaders," she states.

At the same time, Converse recognizes that contemporary students are looking for something else, too. That, Gray says, calls for expansion and diversity. For example, she believes most young women want to compete in athletics. This initiative received a major boost at Converse last fall with

the opening of the Sally Abney Rose Physical Activity Complex. The 16-acre facility features tennis courts, a soccer field, a multi-purpose practice field and the Weisiger Center, a 29,000-square-foot arena that houses basketball and volleyball courts as well as athletic offices and training rooms. Converse intercollegiate teams compete in basketball, volleyball, cross-country and equestrian events, tennis and soccer.

Another building project recently added 14,000 square feet to the Milliken Art Building, almost doubling its size. And this fall, workers will break ground for the \$8-million, 40,000-square-foot Phifer Science and Technology building. "Nationally, women remain underrepresented in the sciences and technology," Gray says. The new facility will help Converse faculty prepare students for careers in these areas. "Once we move the sciences out of Kuhn Hall, where they are now, we'll go in and renovate it. Renovation of residence halls and the student center is also part of the plan."

The physical changes, Gray says, are "tangible evidence of building for the future." What makes them possible is the second

part of her vision: building the college's financial strength. That actually was begun before Gray's arrival. A \$75-million fundraising campaign was announced in 1998, and the college now has amassed \$70 million of it. Major supporters have included Spartanburg businessman George Dean Johnson and his wife Susu, and Mayor Bill Barnet and his wife Valerie. The Barnets recently issued a challenge for the college to raise \$15 million by June of next year; if the goal is met, the Barnets pledge to add a \$3-million gift.

The third piece of Gray's vision is academic excellence. "We do a very good job of *teaching* at Converse," she observes. "Our classes are small, averaging nine to thirteen students. Our faculty know their students; they encourage them to call at home if they have questions." Converse is placing increased emphasis on "experiential learning opportunities": internships, undergraduate research, leadership development, community service and travel studies. The college opened the Nisbet Honors Program in fall 2000. The program focuses on interdisciplinary learning, offering academically gifted students opportunities





to do independent research with faculty mentors, to take honors courses, to interact with nationally known visiting scholars and to meet socially to discuss intellectually challenging topics.

Gray takes special pride in the college's Model League of Arab States Team, which debates teams from other schools regionally and nationally. Converse students consistently represent the Southeast in national finals. "It's our national championship. We don't have a national champion basketball team—yet. We have Model Arab League."

The efforts of Converse planners are paying off, attracting both highly motivated students and national academic recognition. *U.S. News & World Report* this year ranked Converse No. 14 in the South and No. 3 in



KEN GHELE PHOTO/COURTESY CONVERSE COLLEGE

terms of "best value" among southern colleges and universities. It also has been included in *The Best 201 Colleges in the Real World*.

"The student who chooses Converse has a certain amount of

self-confidence about who she is and a real interest in becoming her own person," Landon notes. She says that sense of self-determination encompasses a strong sense of honor, pointing out that the



Students find relaxing study nooks both indoors and out. Foreign study programs include archaeological research (right). Below: the newly expanded Milliken Art Building.



honor system is run entirely by students themselves. “It’s a system of self-governance by peers. The basic assumption is, ‘I will do my own work and respect the property and rights of others, and I will expect them to do the same.’ ”

That fact that Converse is a stickler for student integrity by no means suggests stodgy formality. Students are relaxed and have their share of fun—often en masse. A traditional autumn gala is “1889 Week.” Describes Landon: “‘1889 Week’ is staying up all night long decorating all the residence halls. It’s an incredible celebration of school spirit. We splatter the school colors, purple and gold, over *everything*, from banners to our faces.” Students stage skits and other activities, and organize com-

munity service projects—blood and food drives, for example.

Another Converse tradition takes place frequently at “La Fountain,” the scenic pool beneath the dining hall picture window. When a student becomes engaged, her classmates ritually toss her in the water. “Their boyfriends often propose at one of our semiformal dinners,” Landon says, “so they may be in formal dress, and that water may be quite cold. They still go in.” “La Fountain” frequently is tinted with food coloring during “1889 Week.”

Meanwhile, the campus life center bustles with every activity from impromptu ping-pong and billiards to synchronized swimming by the Tarpon Sharks team. The Sneakers coffeehouse, Landon

quips, is “always open, always busy; we are always eating.”

And there is always something in the works at Converse, carefully and joyously organized by student committees. Landon shares the most famous Converse joke: “How many Converse College students does it take to screw in a light bulb? Seventeen—one to screw in the bulb and sixteen to form a committee to design a T-shirt to commemorate the event.”

How will the Converse College of the future be different from that of today?

“Five years from now,” Gray says, “our arts and science programs will be bursting at the seams. Our athletic teams will be better and better. Many of our renovations will be complete. Students coming to Converse will be capable women who thrive in this environment, find their own voices and prepare to do whatever they want to do in the world.

“Our faculty will be strongly supported by this institution so they can focus on their teaching, involve students in their research and take students abroad for study.

“And we will be financially strong.” ❖