

A fellowship of WOMEN

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Joseph Dennehy



Mary Bunting (right) began the fellowship program at Radcliffe College in 1960 so that poets like Martha Collins (top) and artists like Catherine Bertulli (far right) could work with other talented women in a supportive community.



Martha Stewart



Joseph Dennehy

BY CHRISTINA ROBB

A fellowship of **WOMIEN**

The Bunting Institute gives women a chance for a "strong interaction with women in a professional realm."

Hemalata C. Dandekar is an architect with a Ph.D. in urban planning. She has designed houses for psychiatrists in Beverly Hills and evaluated shelters for homeless people in Calcutta. She has worked for UNESCO and the World Bank and taught at MIT and UCLA. She is crying now, as we sit in her office at the Bunting Institute in Radcliffe Yard.

Six years ago, she spent a year studying an Indian village, listening to the women talk about the insides of their lives, often squatting with them in the fields they use for latrines, during the one time of day when they had leisure for gossip. "What friends?" a village woman would ask her when she wanted to know about support groups. "I don't have any friends. When you get married, life stops." The last time Dandekar had news from the village, she learned that one woman, who was just her age and who had begun to love her like a sister, had burned to death in a kitchen fire. Dandekar is sure the woman's in-laws murdered her so her husband could remarry and yet keep his dead wife's dowry. There is anger in Dandekar's tears, as well as love. What good is so-called development if it leaves women and untouchables as powerless as ever? Dandekar, 38, was born and raised in India, and even though she "wanted to escape," she says, to the United States and is now a US citizen, she wants the work she does here to make a difference to India, somehow.

For the last three years, Dandekar has been an assistant professor of urban planning at the University of Michigan. The "assistant" in her job title means she has not been granted tenure at Michigan — yet. But she is on a "tenure track": Six years from the time she first went to work at Michigan, with time out for any fellowships she may win, she will either be promoted to associate professor and thereby become virtually unfireable, or she will be fired. Her tenured colleagues will make this decision after a review of virtually everything she has done professionally, and their decision will be based as much on state budget cuts and intellectual fashion as on the merit of her work.

Two years ago, the president of the University of Michigan nominated Dandekar for a nontenured faculty fellowship at the Mary Ingraham Bunting Institute of Radcliffe College in Cambridge, the nation's only established think tank for women. Michigan is a big school, but because the Bunting fellowship is only for women, Dandekar stood out — she is the only woman in her department. When her nomination reached the Bunting Institute, the field was crowded. Dandekar was one of hundreds of nontenured faculty women nominated by more than one hundred and fifty university presidents, and only four Bunting fellowships are reserved for nontenured faculty women each year. But Dandekar won one of them. And when she heard that the Bunting Institute had awarded her a fellowship, she was, she says, "very ambivalent about it."

"My institution nominated me as their token woman on the untenured faculty. I couldn't back out because the dean was so pleased about it — they're pleased about the national recognition," she says. But the Bunting Institute is part of Radcliffe College, which is affil-

ated with Harvard University, and Dandekar thought the place might be more of the genteelly chilling Harvard she had known years before as the wife of a Harvard student she has since divorced. "I wasn't sure that this was going to be anything more than prestige," she says.

The fellowship gave her two semesters at the Bunting Institute, among forty other fellows working on a multitude of scholarly and creative projects, each with an office and a salary of about \$16,500 and no teaching responsibilities. She has used the time to finish a cookbook of Indian village recipes, start another book about how Indian village development affects or bypasses the lives of women, and write five articles. From the point of view of the academic publish-or-perish laboratory-rat race, she has used the year successfully and may have a better chance at tenure than she did when she arrived. But, she says, she was also producing books and articles at a fine clip in Michigan.

What the Bunting Institute has really given her is a "strong interaction with women in a professional realm" — something she had never experienced.

"You walk in, and the community is there," she says. "I think it's wonderful. I didn't expect it." What she expected was more of the scholarly eyebrow-lifting she gets from her colleagues in Michigan, who are often very supportive of her career, but not very supportive of her ideas. "There's a blockage, you know, when you talk to men about cooking or about development. It's a very male idea — what 'development' is." Her own female definitions of development have to do with what economic resources women can control, what issues women can talk about openly. "Can [women] coalesce in groups around women's issues?" she asks. In the Indian village she studied for more than a year, as in many university departments where there are not enough women to form a group, "the answer is no," Dandekar says. The result is isolation.

For instance, her male colleagues

Continued on page 36

CHRISTINA ROBB IS A STAFF WRITER FOR THE *GLOBE* MAGAZINE.

Bunting

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 13

couldn't understand why she wanted her contribution to the University of Michigan's series of monographs about Southeast Asia to be a cookbook of village recipes, *Beyond Curry*. But when she got to the Bunting Institute, she discovered that the Schlesinger Library, a floor below her office, had a collection of 2300 cookbooks, and the curator introduced her to a group of culinary historians who are helping her design a book about cooking and architecture. At Michigan, she says, her colleagues ask her, "What good is this — all this gossip about women?" But in the community of women scholars and artists at the Bunting Institute, women whose fields are very different from hers follow her work easily. "I sometimes find," she says, "you get the most interesting comments back from the poets."

Outside of the Bunting Institute, many academic institutions find less and less room at the top for women. From society as a whole, many women feel a patronizing impatience or indifference to their concerns replacing the general sympathy of a decade ago. At Harvard, about two-fifths of the undergraduates are women. In the graduate schools, between a fourth (business) and two-thirds (education) of the students are women. Less than 5 percent of the full professors in the faculty of arts and sciences are women — a grand total of eighteen women. In 1976, 22 percent of the associate professors and assistant professors in arts and sciences were women; in 1982 that figure was 21.4 percent.

"I think the attitude and atmosphere on campus is worse in the last three years, last two years," says Margaret McKenna, director of the Bunting Institute. A former civil rights lawyer in the US Department of Justice, McKenna was a special counsel to the President during Jimmy Carter's administration and later was deputy undersecretary in the Department of Education. "The lack of commitment [to the rights of women

and minorities in the Reagan administration] has had a trickle-down effect on society, including college campuses."

From faculty and students, McKenna says, "I hear comments like, 'They' — meaning women and minorities — 'have had it terrific for the last few years, but now it's our turn again.'" On the road last February, McKenna says, "I heard from fellows all over the country, 'Affirmative action is out. It's gone — in a year.'" She says these comments reflect the decreased pressure on universities to be fair to women and minorities or lose federal contracts. Under Carter, she says, "People perceived that universities could lose funds for discriminating. That perception is gone."

But the Bunting Institute is not gone. After twenty-three years and half a dozen metamorphoses, it is still committed to changing what Mary Bunting calls the "climate of unexpectation about what women would do, could do with their education" by allowing about forty talented women a year to form a supportive community in which each woman can work on whatever she wants. Since 1960, when Bunting resigned as professor of bacteriology and dean of Douglass College of Rutgers University to become president of Radcliffe College and proposed and began what she called the Radcliffe Institute, more than eight hundred women have spent a year or more as fellows.

Bunting's original idea, she says, was to limit the pool of applicants to the Boston area by offering small stipends to support women in pursuing independent projects or studies. Her hope was that if the Radcliffe Institute worked in Boston, then each major metropolitan area might form its own, similar institute. "I'm certain that if we'd set this thing up to be a fellowship [drawn from] all over the country, then we would have been picking the few people who already had it made. We were picking people who weren't so different from other people, and we were valuing their potential," Bunting says now, at 73, eleven years after her retirement from Radcliffe.

But some of those people, chosen as

some of the very first fellows, were the poets Anne Sexton, Maxine Kumin, and Denise Levertov and the writers Tillie Olsen and Maureen Howard — only two of whom were from Boston, and all of whom developed national reputations. News of the Radcliffe Institute spread far beyond New England. The *New York Times* broke the story of Mary Bunting's new think tank on page one in November 1960, and soon afterward the editors of *Time* magazine called Bunting and told her they wanted to do a cover story about the institute because they couldn't go out to dinner in New York without hearing it discussed.

Constance E. Smith, director of the Radcliffe Institute for its first decade, inspired tremendous affection among the fellows she and her staff selected, and she didn't mind traveling to find them. For instance, she tried to recruit Matina Horner, a young graduate student in psychology at the University of Michigan in the late 1960s — "and I don't even know how she knew I was there," Horner says. Horner never took Smith up on her in-

itation, but she became president of Radcliffe when Bunting retired in 1972, and Horner presided over the transformation of the Radcliffe Institute into what is now the Bunting Institute, a center where scholars and other professional women from all over the world come to think and create.

In twenty-two years, the pressures on these fellows outside the ivy-covered walls of Radcliffe Yard have changed, the information on a typical fellow's curriculum vitae has changed, and many more women apply. But the communities they have formed when they have gotten together have continued to feel very much the same. When I listen to women who were fellows ten or twenty years ago, or last year, they describe the same experience.

They call it validation. They mean something like blessing. And as I listen to them tell their stories — scholars, writers, philosophers, an artist, a lawyer, a marine biologist — I wonder whether every woman needs this kind of special blessing by a community of women, and has to get it somehow, if she is to find work that feeds



The first decade of the Radcliffe Institute was overseen by Constance E. Smith, who died in 1971.

her spirit and her heart.

Mary Sadovnikoff got her fellowship twenty years ago, when the Radcliffe Institute was in a house on Boylston Street and one-third of the fellows were artists. I meet her at the opening of an exhibit of current works by three artists who were fellows with her, when the yearly stipends were two or three thousand dollars and most of the fellows were local mothers of small children. Anne Sexton met the artist Barbara Swan and started collaborating on their versions of Grimm fairy tales when they were both fellows during this early time. And Barbara Swan told her friend Mary Sadovnikoff that she should try for a fellowship. So Sadovnikoff applied to take a leave from teaching junior high school music in order to compose some music as a Radcliffe fellow. After all, the master's degree she received from Brandeis in 1955, the year her first child was born, was in composing.

But after Sadovnikoff had returned to composing for her year as a fellow, she found a teacher who she thought might teach her to relax the tension that had always plagued her as a performer, and she realized that what she really wanted to do, she told the institute staff, was perform. So they took another chance on her, and her fellowship was renewed "on grounds of shifting gears," she says. Today Sadovnikoff performs and records on the kind of piano Mozart played, a forte-piano, all over the United States and Europe. And she worries that the institute as it is today may be focusing too much on academics and too little on artists, feeling that "they're studying the people that did it instead of doing it."

Diane Middlebrook, for instance, is an English professor, with a doctorate from Yale, a former academic dean and director of the Center for Research on Women at Stanford University. She traveled from Palo Alto, California, to spend the past year as a Bunting fellow doing research for her biography of Anne Sexton, who commuted from Newton to be among the first fellows at Mary Bunting's Radcliffe Institute in 1961.

"Sexton was so dazzling an example of the suburban housewife making a profession. She

knew how to find support systems," Middlebrook says. Sexton phoned Radcliffe the day after the college announced it was going to grant small stipends for independent study to women around Boston. But Middlebrook feels that for Sexton, whose first book was about to be published when she got the fellowship, the time at Radcliffe added little more than prestige to her career. "She needed it on her vitae. But I don't think she learned anything here," the scholar says. "It wasn't in an exclusively female environment that she found herself empowered." Instead, Sexton got her greatest inspiration among working poets and, especially, theater people, Middlebrook says.

Middlebrook says she herself is one of the two current fellows who identify themselves explicitly as "feminist scholars," and for her, the chance to work at the institute has been a dose of "paradise." She notes that the director, Margaret McKenna, as a lawyer, "doesn't really have a feeling for academics," but Middlebrook also notes that since the institute's elaborate selection process now involves academic experts from all over the country, McKenna doesn't need to be one. "She's a tough advocate for the institute, and that's what it needs here," Middlebrook says. "I have absolutely nothing but admiration of this place."

Former fellows keep up a loyal controversy about what kind of women should be fellows. Artists argue for more artists, nonacademics for nonacademics, local women for local women, foreign women for foreign women, musicians for musicians. But since the groups of fellows seem to come together in the same warm and validating way no matter how they are composed, it is hard to think of some rule by which a woman in one of these categories could be found essentially more deserving than a woman in another.

It's easier to argue against other kinds of imbalance, but many fewer fellows mention them: The oldest fellow, Middlebrook, was 44 this year, and she was the only fellow to mention agism at the institute. There have been only three or four black fellows each year for the past several years, and Linda Perkins, the institute's as-

sistant director, who is black, is leaving this year. None of the fellows who are white mentioned this scarcity.

Karen Fields, a sociologist of religion who went to graduate school at the Sorbonne and teaches at Brandeis, found the institute a good place to get away from the vagaries of tenure review and to pursue her investigations of "the way the invisible operates as real in the social context" in the religious experience of a group of South Carolina Methodists. "I'm very grateful to have the freedom for a year to read as I want and write as I want. The femaleness of the environment doesn't make that much difference to me," Fields says. "If you're black and female, you're not isolated as a female at Radcliffe. There's still just a handful of black people in the environment." Fields, who is black, says she has felt isolated. When Radcliffe celebrated Black Women's Oral History Week in February, Fields had the "interesting experience," she calls it, of listening to a group of scholars deliver papers about black women's oral history; only one of the scholars was a black woman.

McKenna complains about general difficulties of recruiting black scholars and mentions that a 79-year-old writer will be the oldest fellow next year. She talks about adding a fellowship program for women teaching at community colleges, since they may be in the shoes of the women at home with small children whom the institute first attracted as fellows. She wants to expand the number of fellows in residence from about thirty-four to fifty or more, so that it will be possible to add more nonscholars without subtracting scholars, and above all, she wants to increase the number of fellows in public policy, whose busy lives rarely allow them time to reflect or find out what scholars are saying.

Phyllis Segal, a lawyer who was the legal director of the legal defense and education fund of the National Organization for Women during the most recent campaign for the equal rights amendment, left NOW to re-coup at the Bunting Institute as the first of the public policy fellows McKenna would like to see more of. She has spent the



Diane Middlebrook spent her Bunting fellowship doing research for her biography of Anne Sexton.

year trying to figure out why, although courts were applying the equal protection clause of the Constitution to litigation in-

volving women's rights, women's low earnings and status were not improving. And she thinks she succeeded: "I do un-

derstand why merely applying to men and women alike a single set of laws and government

Continued on page 44



Margaret McKenna (left), the director of the Bunting Institute, and Phyllis Segal, the institute's first public policy fellow.

Bunting

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 40

policies will not transform gender hierarchy, to the extent that those laws and policies were developed with a set of male-centered expectations — for instance, for a workplace in which employees didn't have child-care responsibilities." Such laws are only fair to "women who want to be like men," Segal says. In a working paper based on her year's study, she plans to demonstrate her discovery that "where the Constitution doesn't discriminate against women, they're invisible," Segal says. "What I produce will be useful in improving the status of all women."

Segal's year at the institute has also helped her begin to change from a city workaholic to a suburbanite who pays attention to the quality of life, and that kind of personal change is common among fellows. When she took up her fellowship, Segal and her husband moved with their two children from New York City to Wayland, and Segal plans to remain in Massachusetts and work part-time as a special counsel to the state secretary of transportation, so she can have more time to write about women's rights and work for the equal rights amendment.

Some of the women who come to the institute have waited a long time for this validating freedom. Talking to them in the comfort of the community they form at the Bunting Institute, you get the feeling about some of them that they have come in from the cold, like secret agents. At their weekly Wednesday lunches, they put all the little tables in the institute's common room

together and gather around in one big circle to eat the lunches they've packed.

At an institute lunch with foreign women physicians touring the country as guests of the United States Information Agency, Hemalata Dandekar trades her Indian cookbook for a novel in English about Egyptian urban development, and then a Boston psychiatrist, a West Coast novelist, and Dandekar listen to two visiting Egyptian doctors, who are also friends, talk about the way they manage to hold down prestigious jobs in Egypt and do traditional things like help their daughters choose good husbands. No one wants to say good-bye when the schedule-keeping USIA aides appear with their briefcases snapped and their watches raised.

Earlier in the year, staff assistant Katie Whelan says, the fellows gave Betty Friedan an argument when she came for lunch. Some fellows were indignant when the author of *The Feminine Mystique* tried to tell them that they had not advanced to what Friedan calls the second stage of feminist thinking. Whelan remembers some of them shouting, "How dare you say we're in the first stage?" They thought they were doing all right," the staff assistant says with a grin.

McKenna hired Whelan to set up a fair and systematic way of reviewing the more than six hundred applications that the institute receives for forty fellowships each year. Like McKenna, Whelan has a background in politics. Whelan worked on Edward M. Kennedy's presidential campaign in 1980 and ran Walter Mondale's presidential campaign at the state Democratic convention in Springfield last spring. Though Whelan has enjoyed the sense

of community inside the institute, she has not enjoyed running interference between the institute and the rest of the academic world. "I like politics better," Whelan says frankly, throwing up her hands at the Byzantine mazes of jealousies and "channels" she says she has run across working for the institute. "The politics is much harsher in academia than it is in politics."

The fellows who are least affected by the cold, harsh academic climate out there are, predictably, the least academic. Elinor Langer, at the institute this past year to finish a biography of the journalist and novelist Josephine Herbst, lived in a women's commune in Vermont before marriage and her husband's job took her to Oregon ten years ago. She wrote most of the book at home, working alone, on a figure none of her friends had heard of. She wanted to come to the institute "to be around people again," she says, so she would have company while she finished her study of a writer she thought of first as a role model, then as a failure, and finally as a complicated, interesting woman. She knew just what to expect of the institute community because her experience working with women as a journalist and in the commune had taught her what a community of supportive women would be like. "I take this completely for granted," she says.

Catherine Bertulli had no idea what to expect or even quite why she wanted to apply. She had never worked with women. Her work as a painter and sculptor had been going very well, and she lived in a huge, bright studio space in Boston. Being an artist, she has learned to make decisions out of an intuitive sense of rightness. After an artist who'd been a judge for the institute's selection process told her about it, she says, "I felt that I was just ready for this, and it was my time." She decided to apply for time to work on a series of sculptures in plastic foam-board based on patterns from a

book her mother had given her as a child. She decided to name the series after the book, *100 Things a Girl Can Make*. "I could have very easily called it 'A Hundred Things,' and yet the idea was it had something to do with being a woman."

She made her things — wild and wonderful, like living cartoons, a box of socks that look like roses from Alice's Wonderland, an artist's palette, fish, plates — but she also began to realize that she hadn't really become a Bunting fellow to help her art but "to be with women." As she cut and painted her hundred things and began a new series of paintings of musical instruments, she also began to put the woman and the artist in herself together in a new way.

Before she got to the institute, "A lot of my peers had been male," she says. "I kept away from women artists. I didn't know them." All she knew was the conventional stereotype about women artists. "I never thought I could have a family and be an artist. You know — 'You have to give up everything for art.'" But deep inside, she was listening to her biological clock tick out the

message that "a painting is never going to reach out and hug you and call you Mommy."

Bertulli's Bunting fellowship began in July 1982. In November, wearing a wedding dress she had won in a Jordan Marsh contest, she married the Boston set designer Roger LaVoie. Their baby is due this October. Three other Bunting fellows became pregnant this past year, and many fellows are already mothers. They opened Bertulli's eyes about combining family and career, she says.

So Bertulli's fellowship was not important because it gave her freedom to work. She already had that. What it gave her were lessons from women in all sorts of fields who managed to be spouses, parents, and professionals.

"I really used to feel split before, and now I feel integrated. I used to feel I really wanted to be this big artist, and that's changed, that's changed," she says. As an ambitious young artist, "You have this fantasy about getting into the Whitney [Museum] and being in the [Museum of] Modern [Art]." So you work all the time and don't live fully, she says. "And there are other parts of

life. I think I had this feeling, or I had been told, that if you had a family you would lose out. And now I find that it makes you a better artist, because life is just richer that way," Bertulli says.

At the same time that the fellows feel a remarkable sense of community and continuity over the life of the institute, there is a remarkable amount of administrative discontinuity and amnesia on the part of past and present staffs. After Constance Smith's formative decade as dean, which ended with her death in 1971, the institute has had two acting and four permanent deans or directors — six heads in twelve years. The sources of the fellows' stipends have changed from small private grants to much larger public and private grants and support from the Radcliffe endowment. The institute has been renamed and reorganized, and past heads disagree with each other and with Horner and Bunting when they recount the administrative history they remember.

For instance, Bunting says that the institute was founded to provide a center for indepen-

dent study for fellows, to do research on the community of these fellows — which was never really done — and to offer adult education seminars. Horner says that the research and the seminars were never part of the institute. Patricia Graham, a former dean of the Radcliffe Institute who was later head of the National Institute of Education and is now dean of the Harvard Graduate School of Education, says that the three functions were all part of the Radcliffe Institute when she first ran it in 1974 but that the trustees of Radcliffe insisted on separating them and on changing the institute's name when they agreed in 1977 to give the institute access to Radcliffe endowment funds. Graham also reduced the number of fellowships and increased the amounts of the grants so that the fellowships could be opened to a national pool of professional women who needed the equivalent of a teaching salary to be able to take off a year. She says that when she made this change, she intended to divert the local women who could get along with smaller stipends into teaching the Radcliffe Seminars — an annual curriculum

that now includes 1100 adult education courses — so that nearby, distant, reentering, and professional women could all be served. Bunting says she doesn't buy that because the women who taught the seminars wouldn't have time to do the independent projects they could have done as institute fellows.

And so it goes. The intense sense of community that prevails among current and former fellows is notably absent from current and former administrators. They are polite, but they clearly haven't told each other much of what they know. Graham, who like several of the directors was a fellow herself before she ran the institute, says she stays fairly clear of the institute as a former administrator. Her voice changes when she talks about her experience of the community of fellows. "I think it's an absolutely incredible place," she says warmly. "It's the most fruitful professional environment — that is, the fellows themselves — that I've ever been part of."

Martha Collins is a poet who directs the creative writing program at the University of Massachu-

setts at Boston. She won a Bunting fellowship last year to write a long narrative poem about Emily Dickinson and a trip across the country. Instead, she ended up writing a calendar of poems about the passing life she saw and felt as she looked out her window in Radcliffe Yard for a year. She saw a Georgian building out that window. She heard of violence and madness in the world far beyond it. She spent the year weaving them together into a book of days, using her time in the ivory tower to make something whole out of the fragmented world most of us live in most of the time. Her poem "Lent" is a moving record of the kind of work that most Bunting fellows do. It ends this way:

Who can measure the pages we
turn,
the room we have to make for
ourselves,
the cost when we have to
choose?

This is my building, these are
my windows,
these are my days, my prayers,
my penance,
my breath, my unburned sins,
my undone loves. •