

Ellen Tanner '71

50th Reunion Outstanding Service Award



Ellen Tanner has been an active Skidmore volunteer for decades, planning reunions, serving as a class agent, and coordinating regional alumni events. After retiring from a distinguished career as a New York state HIV program administrator in 2010, she further amped up her volunteer efforts. Local arts, education and civic organizations are the recipients of her time and talent, but Skidmore has been the chief and longest-running beneficiary. Co-historian for her 40th Reunion and social media co-coordinator for her 45th, she reprises both roles in celebration of her 50th. “The highlight of my work with Skidmore has always been the opportunity to collaborate with so many enthusiastic and talented fellow volunteers,” she says.

Ellen’s diverse interests reflect the variety of coursework she pursued at Skidmore and sparked a commitment to lifelong learning. “My career path was not a straight one, by choice,” she reflects. “But I had the confidence to move in new directions and embrace change.”

That she did. The American studies major earned a master’s in recreation from SUNY Cortland, an associate’s in nursing from Maria College and a master’s in public service administration from The Sage Colleges, all of which fueled a successful career in public service with the state of New York. Starting as a residential program coordinator at the NYS Office for People with Developmental Disabilities, she retired as the director of the Bureau of Program Review and Systems Development for the NYS Department of Health AIDS Institute, where she oversaw and evaluated health services and managed care for persons living with HIV/AIDS.

Ellen arrived at Skidmore just prior to a sea change in cultural expectations of women that swept the country. In 1967, Skidmore first-years were required to wear skirts to dinner and heed curfews enforced by watchful house mothers. Out-of-town trips required parental notification, and the entertainment of male guests was restricted to first-floor common areas. Those rules were gone by 1969.

In her junior year, nationwide anti-war protests escalated with the U.S. expansion of the Vietnam War into Cambodia. Ellen and many others at Skidmore participated in the student strike. “I felt that it was important to be part of the movement and thought that I could potentially make a difference in the world.” It was during this period, Ellen recalls, that she “learned to stand up for my convictions and take responsibility for my decisions.”

Through it all, Ellen was bolstered by the unconditional support of professors like David Marcel, chair of the American Studies Department, as well as classmates whose friendship continues to enrich her life today.

Passionate about the city of Saratoga Springs, Ellen credits Skidmore for introducing her to its beautiful historic buildings. She says, “I immediately fell in love with the architecture on and around the old campus.” Taking Professor James Kettlewell’s American Architecture class, complete with a Saratoga walking tour, deepened her affection for the city. Ellen returned to the Capital District for a career opportunity in 1978 and has been here ever since. A frequent campus visitor, she enjoys attending readings by resident authors during the Summer Writer’s Institute and bringing friends to campus for Tang exhibits. For good measure, Ellen throws in her own version of a Saratoga walking tour. “Saratoga and Skidmore remain a part of my life,” she says with a bright smile.

For this dedicated volunteer, life’s path has looped back to her alma mater, much to the benefit of her classmates and Skidmore. She continues to give back to the College, taking special care to make her class reunions joyous celebrations for all. “I always learn a great deal when I volunteer,” she says. “But it’s also a lot of fun!”