



Through both good news days and bad, **Louise Dudley** was the face of the University of Virginia as spokesperson from 1991 until her retirement in 2002. A graduate of Smith College, she first came to UVA in 1964 when her husband, Earl Dudley, entered the Law School, then returned in 1989

when he joined the Law faculty full-time.

Her first job was as a writer in the University's news department. The media landscape in 1964 was much different. There was no Virginia or federal Freedom of Information Act. Board of Visitors meetings were closed, and most documents were not considered public. A lot of that changed with Watergate, and by the time Dudley became spokesperson in 1991, more transparency was the name of the game.

When a pavilion balcony collapsed at Finals in 1997, injuring many and killing the grandmother of a soon-to-be-graduate, Dudley was there along

with 25,000 other people and the press. "She briefed reporters as information became known and held press conferences, remaining unflappable throughout," a reporter wrote in 2002.

One of the most difficult crises was in 1998, when it became known that the UVA Medical Center had mistakenly sent two baby girls home with the wrong parents three years earlier. "There was no good solution to that one," Dudley recalled later.

Through it all, she told the truth and maintained good relationships with the media so that the good news – faculty research, student accomplishments, and more – balanced the not-so-good.

**WHEN DID YOU COME TO UVA?**

The first time was 1964 to 1967. I came back in 1989 and was hired as news director in University Relations. I did that for a couple of years. And then in 1991, there were big state budget cuts and there was a lot of downsizing within the University. The spokesperson for the University moved over to the president's office and was teaching in the English department. So that year I became both the spokesperson for the University and head of University Relations.

There were a lot of moving parts that all had to do with communications in that office. There was a news office, a television office, a publications office, and a separate office that produced the faculty-staff newsletter, *Inside UVA*.

**WHAT WAS UVA LIKE WHEN YOU ARRIVED? HOW HAS IT CHANGED AND/OR STAYED THE SAME?**

Well, the very first year I was there was 1964 and the year that I retired was 2002, so that's a pretty long time span. In 1964, the University was almost all male and, of course, it was much smaller and much less diverse. It completely changed in the decades after I was first there.

As it related to my job, there were no Freedom of Information Acts, and reporters could not sit in on Board of Visitors meetings. I used to joke that when the Board of Visitors was meeting in the Rotunda and going to take action, you would watch for the white smoke to go up from the roof, kind of like waiting for the new pope to be elected.

**HOW DO YOU THINK DIFFERENT ASPECTS OF YOUR IDENTITY, INCLUDING BEING A WOMAN, IMPACTED HOW PEOPLE RESPONDED TO YOU IN YOUR POSITION?**

I never felt really constrained by being a woman. I had gone to Smith, an all-women's college, and we were constantly told you can do anything you want to do. And of course, all the leadership positions there were open to women. And so, I think I had a lot of confidence in my being able to do whatever job happened to come along.

It was helpful to me to be in Leonard Sandridge's management group. He was the No. 2 person under President Casteen, and the majority of the managers who reported to him were women, which is kind of unusual. I think that was another reason that being a woman didn't really seem like an issue to me.

continued

## In Her Words | Louise M. Dudley

### WHAT SUPPORTS DID YOU HAVE?

The other people around that table were people who often I needed to get information from or needed to help with their own connections with the media.

In a job like mine internally, it's really important to build up trust among colleagues. I often had to convince someone who had the answer that, yes, this is public information, that we need to be responsive according to the law, but that they could trust me to not say more than I had to.

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### WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE TO A WOMAN IN A SIMILAR POSITION TODAY?

Back in the day, if a crisis developed that attracted media attention, somebody had to be there in person. I had time to get the word out because nobody was there with their cell phone because there weren't cell phones, and nobody was taking a picture and instantly posting it.

I guess my advice would be to try to stay calm and call on colleagues who have good information and advice. Have a crisis plan already

prepared and thought through, so that you know who's on the team that you will pull together around the table, and put it into practice as much as you can.

But given the instantaneous, constant news cycle today, it really is hard. Taking a deep breath and figuring out, well, how much time do I really have and how much should I be saying in the first minute, the first hour, and then the first day, it takes some practice.

But not all of the job is responding to crises or dealing with horrible things. There's the other half of the job. The reason you want to have good relationships with the media is so you can get out good news about the University, too – faculty research and wonderful things that students are doing. You don't want to get mired in the things that have gone wrong.

### WHAT HAVE YOU DONE SINCE RETIRING FROM UVA?

It was a chance to do some volunteering. I was on the board of Piedmont CASA, which helps kids who have been taken from their home because they weren't safe and you advise the court on what should be the next step for that child. And then I was a board member at ReadyKids, which provides wonderful services to families and caregivers.

I learned a lot about the community from being on the Charlottesville Area Community Foundation board, too. But I also did learn about the community while I was at the University, because the University isn't in a bubble even though some people perceive it that way.

There was a time when the University wanted to enlarge a parking lot at JPJ, and they came across what seemed to be graves. They immediately stopped that work, and I was on a committee to work with community members to figure out what to do about it. So, there were good ways that we interacted, I think, with people who lived near the University.

### **HOW DO YOU WANT TO BE REMEMBERED? WHAT LEGACY ARE YOU LEAVING THAT YOU ARE MOST PROUD OF?**

Carlos Santos, who covered the University for the Richmond Times-Dispatch, said when I retired: "One of the things I could never tell about Louise was whether she was spinning me or not." I was happy that a reporter felt comfortable enough to say that, but also that he pretty much thought of me as being straightforward. So, I would like to be remembered, I think, as someone who represented the University well, told the truth, and could be trusted.

There are times that you can't say everything you know, or maybe you can't say it right then; perhaps it's an active investigation, especially involving the police or some other legal situation. It's very helpful to the person who is the spokesperson to know a lot more than they are allowed to say, but everything they do say should be true. Later on, when it's time to reveal more, you don't want it to turn out that they were fudging things.



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