

“Ever, Always, Dear Old Blair”

Remarks by John C. Bogle, Class of 1947

At the 60th Reunion of His Class

Blair Academy

Blairstown, New Jersey

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On this gathering of Blair’s Old Guard, I’m delighted to have the opportunity to reflect with you on my Blair experience. Attending Blair Academy was one of the seminal events of my long life, and my active association with our school now spans the better part of sixty years.

I’ve been asked to talk about three topics: my two years—two deeply formative years—as a student; my 35 years as a trustee (including 15 years as chairman); and since 2002, as a grandparent (of Rebecca Renninger ’04 and Christopher St. John ’10). I’ll close with a few words about how I see Blair today. After my relatively brief (for me!) remarks, distinguished faculty member Dr. Martin Miller will lead a question-and-answer session in which I’ll be happy to discuss whatever topics may interest you.

The Student Years

When my late twin brother David and I enrolled at Blair in the late summer of 1945, we were well familiar with the school. We had often visited our older brother William (“Bud”), Class of 1945, who graduated but was inducted into the U.S. Marine Corps even before receiving his diploma. I think it’s fair to say that the three Bogle brothers were “good kids,” with a solid component of human decency, honorable conduct, friendship to others, good manners, and respect for our elders—qualities perhaps too easily taken for granted today.

We were all also reasonably bright. But we came to Blair from high schools that were, kindly put, not nearly demanding enough, and in which (as I recall) few graduates aspired to college. So from each of us Blair demanded much, and we were determined to make the most of our incredible opportunity to attend this inspiring academy, in its idyllic setting atop this lovely hill.

Surely part of that determination came from our awareness that we were “on the dole,” as it were. With the Great Depression, our family fortune had evaporated, and our lives had been an unremitting struggle to do with less, each of us working at part-time jobs in order to make ends meet. Blair took a chance on the Bogle brothers, and gave us generous scholarships and jobs, in my case as a waiter in my junior year and waiter captain in my senior year. (Years ago, Dennis Peachey showed me a copy of a letter from my father to Dr. Breed, responding to a request that he fund a larger portion of our support. It said something like, “I appreciate your request that I send \$100 toward the twins’ tuition, but I don’t *have* \$100.”)

My life at Blair was a lark. I made lots of friends, played soccer and tennis (without distinction), was active in school affairs as editor of the Acta and assistant editor of “The Blair Breeze,” and was class

treasurer. An old family saying goes, “idle hands are the tools of the divil (sic),” and I was too fully occupied to get into real trouble. My greatest misdeed was sneaking into town one night to buy ice cream to share with my roommate, Mitchell Reese. (I didn’t get caught!)

But from an academic standpoint, my early days at Blair were not easy. I have no hesitancy in saying that both of my brothers were every bit as intelligent—probably more so—than I. And in the new and tough academic environment in which I found myself, I struggled. My first grades were awful. I particularly remember Mr. Gage giving me a grade of 40 at the end of my first term of Algebra. Determined to get even, I earned a coveted 100 on my final exam, reportedly a grade that he had never awarded before.

I was at Blair to (in the words of our school’s motto) “come, study, learn,” and Blair demanded much of me. Taught by a series of great characters, I responded as best I could. Some of these masters are etched in Blair’s proud history. (Messers. Gage, Walker, Zimmerman and Mason all came to the Academy in 1912.) Others were equally memorable. (My wonderful English teacher in junior year was Henry Adams, albeit not *the* Henry Adams.) I began to learn about history and English and mathematics and science, and loved them all. To this day, I’m most inspired by the quote Mr. Mason drove into my memory, from Macaulay’s description of Samuel Johnson: “the force of his mind overcame his every impediment.”

It was, I think, my determination—a trait that has, for better for worse!, never deserted me—more than my IQ that finally carried me solidly through Blair. While my classmates voted me “best student,” I fell short of being class valedictorian, by a tiny margin. Nonetheless, with the second best grades, I delivered the salutatory address at Commencement. (It was about the evil of intolerance.) The class also voted me “most likely to succeed,” and while I’ve never been sure exactly what promise my classmates saw in me, I’ve done my best to measure up to their high expectations. In any event, when the next lap of my educational journey came, solely because of the preparation I was given during my happy, productive years at Blair, it came at Princeton University.¹

The Trustee Experience

The Blair that I attended was an outstanding school. To the extent that college admissions were a measure, five of us graduates gained entrance to Princeton and at least one to Harvard and Yale, and admissions to Lehigh, Lafayette and other smaller colleges were also strong. But then times changed; boarding schools became less popular; Blair’s limited endowment severely constrained our ability to deal with the new world; and our Board leadership weakened. Into this dire situation came an unlikely hero, Dr. J. Brooks Hoffman, Class of 1936. Brooks became chairman of the Board of Trustees in 1962. With his integrity-laden leadership, his incredible dedication, his indefatigable fund-raising, his contagious enthusiasm, and his deep devotion to our school, he almost single-handedly brought Blair Academy back to life.

In 1972, Brooks invited me to join the Board, and I readily accepted. While the school was at last beginning to move forward again, our endowment fund assets were a paltry \$900,000, largely the result of a gift from Hetty Green—the “Witch of Wall Street” in the 1900s—many decades earlier. (Each summer we had to use these investments as collateral until September, when the tuition rolled in.) Bit by bit, Brooks raised money, and a matching gift campaign inspired by the Keenan foundation added some \$5 million. With other gifts, largely from generous alumni, the endowment had risen to \$10 million by 1985.

¹ Princeton, of course, was also a wonderful learning experience for me, and led directly to my long career in the mutual fund field. That’s a story for another day.

Survival was no longer the issue; restoring our school to its earlier eminence was the task that confronted the Board.

It was then that Brooks and his successor, George W. Jenkins, '32, visited me and offered me the chairmanship. I knew the task would be formidable and demanding, especially for someone who was at the same time trying to build Vanguard, the little firm I had founded only a decade earlier. But I've always loved the challenge with long odds, the thrill of leadership, and, above all, the opportunity to leave anything I touch better than when I found it.

We soon set about the work of taking Blair "up a notch" (or more). With the enthusiastic support of the Board and Headmaster Jim Kelley, we funded the first new classroom building since the construction of Clinton Hall in 1900—a mere 89 years earlier!—developed a master plan for the development of our campus and a long-term strategic plan focused on the school's strengths, objectives, and aspirations.

In 1988, amidst our progress, I got the letter that no Board Chairman wants to receive: Jim Kelley informed me that he had decided to step down from his 12-year headmastership. The Board immediately approved a search committee, and we set about the task of selecting a new leader. I'd been around business—and around Blair—long enough to know almost intuitively that our choice would be the most important decision of my watch, and I threw myself into the task of finding a new headmaster with joy and optimism.

By the spring of 1989, we had pretty much made our decision. But the search firm we'd retained would hear none of it: "You haven't seen enough candidates. You have to see three more." Honestly, I thought the firm was kind of brassy, but we took their advice. It turned out that they were right. In one of the three new candidates we found all that we were looking for, and much more. Leadership, intelligence, commitment, personal warmth, love of learning, involvement with students, concern for teachers, and charm; he came with yet another bonus, a wonderful wife with the courage and tenacity to join with him in the mission.

From our very first meeting, Chan Hardwick and I "hit it off." Our breakfast in Valley Forge lasted about three hours. When he left to return to Taft School in Connecticut, I was convinced that we had found our man. Yes, he was only 36 years of age, but I assumed that "the force of his mind" (remember that phrase?) and the energy and enthusiasm of his youth would, well, "overcome every impediment" that might lie ahead. He took office in June 1989, and serves Blair to this day. In just a few weeks, he and Monie will soon begin their 19th year at Blair. They have led our Academy through its wonderful renaissance.

Helping to govern Blair has been a wonderful and rewarding challenge for me. The tasks of governance are easily articulated: set high goals, collar the resources (by hook or by crook!) necessary to realize them, and, above all, give the responsibility for carrying them out to those with extraordinary leadership capability. Such leaders are, by definition, rare. So "once you have found them, never let them go." Treasure them. Support them. Honor them. Yes, love them too. And never forget that it is the *headmaster* who leads the school, not the Board *chairman*. (Using a sports analogy, the chairman may be the coach, but the headmaster is the quarterback!)

At the same time, never forget that it is the responsibility of the Board of Trustees remains vital; its role essential. The Board is entrusted with the stewardship of the Academy's assets. Not only our physical assets—our buildings and our real estate (thanks to my friend Herb Siegel '46, now nearly doubled in size by the recent acquisition of the neighboring Girl Scout Camp). Not only the stocks and bonds in our endowment fund, now a far more healthy \$58 million, up from that less-than-\$1 million total

all those years ago). Not only the great asset represented by the school's leadership, its faculty and its administration, and those who maintain its campus. And not only the students who, just as I did all those years ago, decided to *come* to Blair's welcoming halls, to *study*, and to *learn*. The Board is ultimately responsible for preserving and protecting all of these assets, yes, but to also hold stewardship of the school's very nature and character. Lord knows, I've done my best to drive our school toward those goals, and I've loved every minute of it.

The March of the Generations

It's been my great joy not only to have the opportunity to study at Blair and to serve Blair, but to help assure that the opportunity that was given to me all those years ago would echo down through the generations. I'm a long way from being the smartest guy on the planet, but I'm smart enough to recognize that the blessings of receiving, enormous though they may be, offer lesser reward than the opportunities to give. St. Luke had it right: "To whom much is given, of him much is expected."

I see no reason to go into detail today about how some combination of luck and determination and caring have enabled me to repay much of my awesome obligation to Blair Academy. Some of you may be aware of the buildings that are part of my legacy here, and I'm not yet through helping out. But, with a touch of temerity, I will discuss my attempt to enable later generations of, as it were, "Bogle Boys" (and girls) reach for the same brass rings of life that we "real" Bogle Boys eagerly grabbed all those years ago. Even as our Blair archivists saved that sad letter that my father wrote all those years ago, they saved my letter stating my intention to repay my debt. Dated June 19, 1968, I wrote, "I have decided to start a scholarship fund in the amount of approximately \$3,000, hopefully to be added to from time to time over the years."

A lot can happen over 40 years. And in this case, a lot did happen. From that modest beginning, with larger additions as my salary grew, the assets of "the Bogle Brothers Scholarship Fund" is now well into the six figures, and has already helped more than 100 Blair students to attend, mostly for multiple years. (Similar Bogle Brothers scholarships are also available at Princeton, with first priority given to Blair graduates who qualify.)

It's a wise thing to count one's blessings, but an even wiser thing to share them. Even as my career was immeasurably enhanced by the education and nurturing I received at Blair, so I've tried to share my blessings with young men and women of high character, determination, and promise, who can make the most of these traits at Blair Academy.

I urge those who have received this blessing, and have good fortune in their lives to repeat the "get-scholarship, make-the-most-of-it, give-scholarship" pattern. Continuing that virtuous circle that will continue to serve Blair, even as it will serve our nation. For good citizens are the backbone of any society that endures, and it's been a thrill for me to see these young Bogle Brothers Scholars go on to college and then out into the world.

It's an even greater thrill to see one's own grandchildren revel in the Blair experience, and Eve and I are now enjoying our second such experience. Rebecca thrived at Blair, and graduated in 2004, beautifully prepared for the wonderful experience she is having at Davidson University. Chris is in his freshman year here, and has truly blossomed, earning top level grades and enjoying singing in musicals and concerts held in Armstrong-Hipkins Hall. These two wonderful souls weren't *pushed* to come to Blair. Basically, they *demand*ed it! In them, I see a tiny bit of the young Jack Bogle who reveled and labored and loved these ivied halls all those years ago. Time marches on; happily Blair marches on too. And we rely on the wonderful, talented students of this era to take up the mantle of leadership for Blair in the years to come.

When we sing to our alma mater, “ever, always, dear old Blair,” we’re not using mere words. We’re declaring that Blair *is* “ever” and “always.” Those words are a pledge—a pledge that we alumni have the responsibility to do our part to assure that our Academy continues to flourish. Yes, of course that involves money. It also involves commitment to *serve*. And it also involves our deep understanding that an essential component of our school is the recognition that our leaders and teachers and administrators deserve our faithful support. To them, and to their predecessors (however long departed), and to their successors (whenever they arrive at this place), we owe not only our unfailing support but our deepest gratitude.

I close with this thought because this is Peter Amerman’s final year at Blair after 38 years of committed service. Rick Clarke has already given us 36 years, and Dave and Candy Low arrived here 27 years ago. These veterans are the rocks of Blair’s foundation. Without fanfare, and without seeking or expecting the gratitude we owe them, they have served with quiet effectiveness, providing wisdom and judgment, justice and compassion. They represent the very best that any independent boarding school, *any where, at any time*, has to offer.

Yes, the generations march on. As I tell my own large family—there are 24 of us—“life is just a series of comings and goings.” There are already two Board Chairmen who have followed me. And, yes, one day—a long, long time from now, I pray—there will be a new headmaster. That’s just the way life works. But as the inevitable, eternal process of evolution that passes on the responsibility for our marvelous Blair Academy to future generations of leaders and teachers and students, I know that you share my joy in this lovely day of celebrating—warm in temperature to be sure, but far warmer in good feelings—looking back at the *past* with pride, looking ahead to the *future* with optimism, and counting at this *present* moment the blessings we share in being part of the wonderful Blair family.