Today is March 11th, 2008, and we are here today as part of the Living Legacies Oral History Project for Randolph-Macon College. With us today is Robin Anne Floyd, class of 1985. My name is Judee Showalter and also with us today is Sarah Hendricks. So, Robin Anne, can you tell us how you came to Randolph-Macon? How did you hear about Randolph-Macon?

RF: Sure, I was, I believe, starting somewhere my junior perhaps early senior year of high school. I got some, some of the usual kind of college literature in the mail, and I was, at graduation, back at, I’m from South Carolina, graduated from a public high school near Greenville South Carolina. And I imagine like many schools, Randolph-Macon had gotten names from SAT kind of things and as I was going through things as they came in the mail I would go over it with my parents. I had actually never heard of Randolph-Macon College, but my mother had and she’s the one who encouraged me to think about Randolph-Macon. So I did. I contacted the school and came to visit, and so on.

JS: When was the first time you actually came to Ashland and saw the campus?

RF: That’s a little harder to pinpoint, but I believe it must have been in the fall of my senior year of high school. Because I remember coming back for a second visit for a scholarship interview in the winter of that year, so it was probably some time, late fall 1980.

JS: And what were your impressions, if not the first time, but when you came back for scholarship interviews?
RF: It’s funny as I was coming here today for this it’s very much the same. It’s the same feeling of a small town. It’s funny to say it but it’s almost kind of like love at first sight. I didn’t even know what to expect because I hadn’t really seen that many pictures. I’d never been here. I’d never, didn’t know much about it except from the brochures and certainly there was no internet searching in those times. But it instantly had this very warm community feeling to it that it really still retains today.

JS: Now, scholarship interviews are actually very different now then they were in the ‘80s.

RF: Um-hm.

JS: What was the scholarship interview weekend like?

RF: I remember it was cold. There, it was, first of all, I think there were fewer students invited and there were fewer scholarships. The college has greatly expanded the scholarship program. There is a lot more available. It felt fairly competitive to me to be honest with you. We had a, we went into interviews with a panel of professors. It wasn’t just one professor. So these are professors we’d never met before and we knew we were competing for scholarships and there were various levels of scholarships so you obviously wanted to get as much as you possibly could. I do remember that Professor George Oliver chaired my committee and he cut a quite imposing figure throughout his career as anyone who ever met him knows and without knowing him, knowing that he had this crazy sense of humor, it just felt as if I were walking into the lions’ den sort of, and he didn’t fool around. He wasn’t, he asked very serious questions and one of them had to do with my reading list, the things I’d written down for the reading list. And on there was, I think there were two things that I’d written down thinking that oh, no, what is he going to do, and he actually did. One was *Mother Jones* magazine and the other one was *Ms.* And he asked me about why I was reading those magazines. And I said, “Well, sir, they are in the house because my mother subscribes to them.” And as it turns out his wife, who was actually a card-carrying member of N.O.W., the National Organization of Women, but of course I no way of knowing that. I just, he wanted to see how I would respond so, but it was a great experience, the whole scholarship interview. I would have to say that they were very welcoming and yet we knew we were here for a purpose to try to get money and compete, and I thought it was a very well-done thing and that [5 minutes] eventually made it possible for me to come to Randolph-Macon, the scholarship. I actually did get one so that was a turning point for me.

JS: And that is our next question. How did you afford a Randolph-Macon education? You had a scholarship? Did you work?

RF: Yes and yes. At that time the maximum scholarship, I believe, which is what I eventually won, was I think, covered half of the tuition which was still significant in those days. But over the course of my four years at Randolph-Macon the tuition, room and board, all the fees probably doubled. It was just at the beginning of the years when college costs really rose, so it was a number of things. I had a number of small outside scholarships. I worked every year that I was here on work study in various offices, including the Admissions office, the President’s office, wherever I could get work and, but the college always met my need. If I was running short or needed something, I could always go to Financial Aid and they would always listen and try to find the best solution for my problem, whether it was a small tiny
grant or loan that would just make the difference, for me to make ends meet. But one of the biggest things that happened to me while I was here, actually is one of the strengths of Randolph-Macon, really, the genius of the school is the faculty and when I was a sophomore, and this was a really big deal for me, financially and other ways. Howard Davis, who was a Political Science professor, stopped me one day on campus and keep in mind I’d never had him before. I did not know him. And said to me, because all the professors know the students; there is a scholarship you might be interested in called the Harry S Truman scholarship and I would like to know if you would want to apply for it. And as it was a very competitive thing, the entire application process took the better course of the year. There were different stages of finals, semi-finals, and interviews and so on. It was a very arduous process and I had absolutely no hope of winning, but if I had won it would mean, would be four years of scholarship money, for the two remaining years as an undergraduate, and this was significant money, and two years of graduate work and so it was a tremendous thing. And as it turned out I actually did end up winning this as did my classmate Gail Gugel. We both did. People are chosen regionally for this. It’s about a hundred recipients a year. So, that sort of captures in a nutshell all the good things I think of as Randolph-Macon, as connections with professors. That you don’t fall through the cracks. They know you, they foster you, they look out for you even if you’re not in their class and the meeting the need of the student, not just financially, in other ways too. But it really speaks to the best of Randolph-Macon. That scholarship alone made a significant difference for me. It really freed up my time to not need to work as much my final two years of college, for example.

JS: So when you arrived as a freshman, from South Carolina, what was that like? What was moving in and freshman year, getting started in Randolph-Macon?

RF: Well I think it was a big adventure for me. I was very excited to be moving away from home and going to college, first of all. But the funniest part of it was that when we arrived with, my whole family came with me, just about my whole family. I had actually never seen the entire campus and I did not know where I would be living. I knew nothing about the dorms. I had never even thought about it or looked at them really or focused on it. So, I was assigned a room in Smith dormitory. And Smith dormitory is now part of the freshman village, but at the time it was fairly dilapidated housing we referred to as the motels because they were long, low-slung one-level dormitories. Very unimpressive, cinderblock walls, and I was a little bit frightened of that but still so excited to be at college it really wouldn’t have mattered where, you know, where I was living. So my, we said our goodbyes. And there I was in what I call the cinderblock house, but I have to tell you it was fun [10 minutes] from day one. I loved the people in my hall. I loved the people, everyone I met. They were just great students. It was very warm, very welcoming. People from places I didn’t know, places I hadn’t been. It was a little bit like going to a foreign country for me because there were, you know, I hadn’t really been around kids from that many different places ever in my life you know in a living situation. So it was a lot of fun. It really, really was and to this day every fall I think I can still smell the grass at Randolph-Macon College just from that first year.

JS: What about out, extracurricular activities? What activities did you participate in on campus?
RF: Oh I think a number of things, but probably the biggest one, the one I was involved in the most over time was the Drama Guild. And that lead to a lot of friendships and lifelong friendships. That’s something I got involved in during the fall of my freshman year actually. A number of people I knew wanted to get involved. And I stayed involved with the productions throughout my four years at Randolph-Macon. That was the biggest one. There were a lot of other small clubs, activities. Some of them were just special events that were going on but that was the by far the biggest that I was involved in.

JS: And how did you decide on your major?

RF: That was a little bit of a long road to get there. There were not nearly the number of majors and minors available then, that there are now. I mean right now there is just such a wealth of great options for students. But then it was pretty much the traditional liberal arts fare. And I came in thinking, planning to be Chemistry major. I started my freshman year fully intending to be a Chemistry major. And while I enjoyed it I realize, I really didn’t have my heart in it enough to stay with that so I started looking around at other things and by chance had just, I think I’d taken, yes, I took an Economics course that freshman year as part of a requirement, and just really loved the coursework. I loved the topic and so I stayed with that and I ended up almost minoring in Political Science and German along the way, but stayed an Economics major.

JS: Who was your advisor?

RF: This is where I am going to lose the name, Biology professor, Dr. Martin?

JS: Okay.

RF: Yes, he stayed my advisor thought my four, he was assigned to me as a freshman I guess because I was a science major coming in and stayed my advisor the whole time. I mean I was close to the faculty in my department and Political Science and so on, but he actually stayed my advisor for the whole four years.

JS: Interesting.

RF: Yes.

JS: You mentioned Howard Davis.

RF: Yes.

JS: Who are some other faculty members that had an impact on you?

RF: Howard was definitely a big one. He was a great professor, a very kind person and hugely supportive of students. Bruce Unger, a tremendous influence, both as a student and after graduating. He was a phenomenal professor. It is just too sad to think about, that both he and Howard are gone now, but Bruce was an incredibly intelligent and giving person and hard on the students, but he gave you what you gave him. He was, he expected a lot but he gave a lot and he was a truly great friend. Another great
class I had and a great friend I made was with B.J. Seymour, professor of Religious Studies. She was a friend of a family friend. So, although I had met her before I came here, I accidently ended up in one of her classes as a freshman, almost accidental, but maybe meant to be again fulfilling a requirement. And I remained very close to her. In fact she officiated at my weeding. I would, and there are so many others. Dr. Baerent in the German department was great. There were a lot of professors I got to know and love, Dr. Oliver in History. So, so many. That’s again the beauty of Randolph-Macon. You know so many professors and it’s hard to just single any one, two, or even three out because they all play a part in supporting you, even if it’s not your field. You know, I think it was Dr. Moore in the Math department. I never [15 minutes] really, really loved math before I was in his class and I loved calculus, by the time I finished that class. I just loved it! I could have been a math major, anyway.

JS: Other than faculty, who were some of your other key relationships? Friends, or staff members or?

RF: Well I certainly got to know the Admissions staff. John Conkright, I worked with him since, I think the whole four years I did something with the Admissions department and stayed friends with him and Allison O’ Brien, who was an alum and then she worked briefly in the Admissions department and I babysat for her and other faculty children and staff. Again, the staff was really great. You got to know everyone in every department it seemed. You got to know people, whether it was the print shop or the cafeteria, or the Registrar’s office or, you know, once through one of my jobs in Admissions I had to do a lot of mail-oriented things, so I’d be Peele Hall a lot. You just got to know the people there and it’s great experience because you get to know how offices work, how to do things administratively. It’s very good job training if you think about it. So I that was sort of a set of skills I picked up along the way. Just made a lot of friends generally, you know, throughout the students that came and went over the years. I don’t know if you want me to talk about personal friends I made among students?

JS: Sure.

RF: Where to start? There are so many. One of the best, best friends that I made, really to this day best friend is, her name is Keri Sue Brunk now, but her name at the time was Keri Sue Hoschar and Keri Sue always cracked me up. We were friends since we were freshman. She was from a place called Triangle, Virginia. I had never heard of a town called Triangle, Virginia. She now lives in Harrisonburg. And we’re still in touch and very close. Don’t see each other nearly enough. But we have many fun memories of talking in the hall bathroom whether it was in one of the motel dorms or Mary Branch or whatever, just you know, just great. She’s always going to be one of my favorite, favorite people. But there were just so many talented, fun students. I think of Brooke Shepherd, who was another drama, probably, I have to tell you, one of the finest actresses and funniest people. She was a history major too, she was an incredibly bright woman. She still lives in Richmond and I’ve been in touch with her a little bit and I think she’s a parole officer now. But she, I worked with her on many productions here and she really, if you’ve seen great acting, she was tremendously gifted as was another friend of ours also in the Drama Guild, Charlotte Hall, a native Virginian and I think she actually lives in Alexandria now. Those were some of my very closest friends.

JS: So other than clubs and going to class what did you do for fun in Ashland?
RF: Well that’s, not a lot. Now there really, you know to be honest with you Ashland was a tiny town, even smaller than it is now and there really, it was a very quiet town. There wasn’t a lot going on. I think the theater was still open then as a functioning theater there downtown, so you could go to a movie there. But there wasn’t, there wasn’t that much to do in the town itself, unless you went for a run, which I did occasionally, and running the Railroad Run which I did also. I don’t know if they do that anymore. Occasionally, you know, trips into Richmond with friends, we would do. But there wasn’t a whole lot going on in the town per se, sadly. I always wanted there to be more interaction with people in town, but there just wasn’t as much of that then, as there is now.

JS: Now you mentioned your Truman scholarship, and it was four years. So what did you do after you graduated?

RF: I went to, I took sort of a year off because I wanted to go to graduate school and I was trying to figure out where and when and all that and I moved to Boston after I graduated with, some friends of mine were moving there and I thought that would be a good place to go [20 minutes] and I was going to apply to schools up there anyway. I wanted to go into international relations or international business, something along those lines. So I was applying to the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts and to the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard. So I just went up there and decided to spend a year there while I was applying and get a job, which was great. My first job was working at MIT and I had worked most recently as a work-study student in the President’s office at Randolph-Macon and then I went from there to my first real job being, again working in a college, at the university at the Vice President’s office at MIT and did end up applying to college, to graduate school and I went to, I ended up going to the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard which was a two-year master’s in public policy program.

JS: Okay and after that what did you do?

RF: Well, I did a lot of different things. Immediately after I graduated I worked on the 1988 presidential campaign. Because I’d always wanted to work on a campaign, I thought that would be a good time to do it. So as a good southerner I said, I was working for the Democratic nominee who was Michael Dukakis, ironically the governor of Massachusetts, where I had just been to school. So I went to Texas, which was hysterical because they called me a Yankee but, I’m from South Carolina. I learned a lot about Texas and it was great, great fun. It was fascinating. And, but around that time I also decided that I wanted to go overseas because I’d always wanted to work overseas. I’d gone to spend a semester in Vienna as a Randolph-Macon student and traveled around southeast Europe and worked on my German but I knew I, always knew that I kind of wanted to spend a significant about of time overseas. So then I went to, while I had been at the Kennedy School I had been selected as one, as a student to go to Berlin, the city of Berlin at that time. Let me back up and say how I got there. As a student at the Kennedy School during those years, which was before the fall of the Berlin wall, before the fall of communism, the city of Berlin was kind of an island in the middle of eastern Germany and they did a lot to promote people coming and staying and working and continuing ties. So one thing they did every year was bring a group of students from Harvard and Stanford to Berlin, and just as an education and basically PR. And part of that tour I was one of, I think there were ten of us all together, was meeting with someone at Deutsche Bank which
was a big bank in Germany and in Berlin and he said if anyone wants to come back and work, be in touch with me. So I did. I called him on it and he was very welcoming and set up basically a paid internship for me to see if I wanted to stay there and work there. And I moved to Berlin, let me think about the number of weeks, six weeks after the fall of the Berlin wall. So it was incredibly good timing. Very, very exciting. Everything in the world was changing. So I moved there, well the Berlin wall fell November 9th, 1989 and this would have been, I moved there on December 27th, 1989. And it was absolutely extraordinary. You could feel things changing literally as you were standing in the streets of Berlin. It was fabulous. But there I was going to work in a bank, in a branch bank in Berlin as a regular bank employee. It was so much fun. You learn more language on the job than anything, I’ll tell you that. So I worked there for a few months, but simultaneously I applied for a fellowship from a German foundation. I knew I probably didn’t want to stay with the bank, but I wanted to have that experience, to see if I wanted to. And I actually did get this other fellowship which was the Bosch Foundation which is another tremendous organization, bringing young Americans over to Germany and I spend an additional year with them working half the year at the German Economics Ministry and then half the year at what’s vaguely our equivalent of what’s the National Association of Manufacturers, sort of. And that was just a fantastic experience, because I got to be at the bank and then fellowship, during this year of transition to unification, of bringing the two Germanys together. And when this whole thing started in 1989 no one knew what would happen. No one knew that communism was truly going to collapse, and no one knew if Germany would really, no one anticipated really that Germany [25 minutes] would come back together, nor that it would happen so, so quickly. And they had, it happened at lightning speed. So I was, you know, for example, before I went on the fellowship I was still working at the bank and I got put into the personnel department at the bank processing East German women coming in to interview for jobs. And then I was sent out on a marketing assignment to East Berlin where they just, it was like the Wild West. Where are we going to put, how here’s commercial, you know, here comes the free market, where are we going to put our branches? It was fabulous and then when I went to the fellowship, again it was fascinating because I was working in the economics ministry and at this association where they were first beginning the baby steps of really building business relationships with the East. It was also a scary time, too, because people in the East that I would interact with that were say, forty and over, had no life skills or life experience. I think about myself at the same age now. That they were totally irrelevant, because all they had done was under communism. They had no relevant skills whatsoever, and you know, it was really very difficult to see the consequences, some of the unintended negative consequences of what this would mean and did. So I stayed on in Germany for a while and I stayed on in Germany until probably the early ‘90s yes, until the fellowship ended and then I came back to the United States.

JS: So how did you stay in contact with Randolph-Macon after graduation?

RF: Through friends. Stayed in touch with faculty also. I didn’t get back to visit as much as I wanted to because I didn’t live near here.

JS: It’s a long way from Germany.
RF: It’s a long way from Germany and Boston. I came back as much as I could. I remember coming back in graduate school for Homecoming but then for a number of years I was living far away and it was very difficult. But I when I came back from Germany and I lived in, I’ve been living in Washington since then. That was much easier, certainly much easier and so I’ve just. Since I’ve been back in the United States over these many years I have been trying to come back as much as I can and have come back to give some talks here and there. Bruce Unger has asked me to come back because they have programs that allow alum come back and talk to current students about job paths and careers and things like that. So that the college reached out, true to Randolph-Macon, to me many times to come back and participate. And then over time I joined the Board of Associates and now the Board of Trustees. So I would say that it wasn’t just me staying in touch, it was them, the school also. And the nice thing there is that, there were always a lot of faculty and staff, a lot of familiar faces at the school that makes you want to come back and stay in touch and be a part of things.

JS: I don’t think anyone has talked about the Board of Associates in any of our interviews. Can you tell us a little bit about what the Board of Associates does?

RF: Sure. I call it kind of a junior board. In fact it was founded I’m thinking about 1980 it was started by the Board of Trustees. It’s an outgrowth, if you will, of the Board of Trustees. And their mission, their mandate, is partly a PR kind of thing in terms of bringing people in, alumni, friends who, to groom them for being part of the college community. It’s also sometimes their task, they’re given things to do that the Board of Trustees doesn’t have time to do, or can’t do, or doesn’t have the people power to do, smaller things. They have, for example, funded certain programs over the years, internship programs and the like, taken on some special projects. But it’s another board that is really a way to get people involved in the life of the college, whether they’re alumni or friends or parents.

JS: You and your husband have started a scholarship here on the campus.

RF: Yes.

JS: Can you tell us who that scholarship is for and what inspired you to do that?

RF: Well, I’ll start with the inspiration part. In going back to the beginning, as I said the school really made it possible for me to be a student here. I needed desperately the college’s assistance in meeting financial need and I felt so appreciative of my experience here and the effort that the school [30 minutes] went to for me, that I knew in the back of my mind always if I could ever make a difference for someone else in that way that’s something I would like to do. And my husband and I both feel very strongly about supporting education in particular. And I, so I approached the college and said I’d like to start building a scholarship over time and what do you need? And they came back to me and said what would you like to do? And I said well, I’d like to leave it open to some extent, but if possible to encourage and help women in the social sciences, if at all possible. So that was the goal of the scholarship. But I, again I didn’t want to tie the college’s hands too much because I know that sometimes you don’t have a student that fits that need and someone else needs it so, you know, by all means go do that. It’s nice to try to tailor the scholarship but by the same token if someone else needs it you don’t want hold that up from them either.
JS: Those are all my questions. Are there, anything else about Randolph-Macon that you want to share with us today?

RF: Well, I don’t know who the future audience might be for listening to the oral histories of us. Maybe me in a few years, I’ll come back and listen to this and think, gosh, I sounded so young. It was, you know, there are certain things in our lives if we’re fortunate, that have a really good impact at the time and it’s a lasting thing. And there I was very fortunate. I was fortunate to have found Randolph-Macon. I was fortunate that my mother helped me find Randolph-Macon. And it was a challenging, rewarding, fabulous time in my life that has stayed with me, forever. You know, I’ve worked at MIT. I’ve worked at Harvard. I worked several years after I came back from Germany. I worked at Georgetown University. I’ve worked at really top-notch institutions and I have to tell you that Randolph-Macon beats them all in so many ways. No, it’s not a large research university. It never will be. But the quality of the teaching here is fantastic. And there are lots of other liberal arts colleges out there. I can not imagine that you will find better faculty, a better run institution, a warmer feeling at any of those schools. The college has its tagline now of the “believe in the moment of connection,” but it totally makes sense. That is the essence of it and you can talk to a graduate from fifty years ago, or ten years ago, or one year ago and I’ve yet to find someone who doesn’t agree with that. That is the essence of this school. And yet I just feel incredibly fortunate to have had that. As I went on to other places I always had that to fall back on, the strength of that and that if I made it through Professor Oliver’s history class I could make it through anything! You know, it was that good a foundation for me.

JS: Well, thank you very much for coming and sharing with us today and for adding your voice to our oral history project.