'Stand above the crowd ... Excellence in all you do'

Author has Gibbs School covered with a white glove

By Kristen J. Tsetsi
Journal Inquirer

A New York Times obituary for former People magazine editor Patricia Ryan, who died late last year, sums up her education thus: "Ms. Ryan, whose only post-secondary education (prior to a job at Sports Illustrated) had been secretarial school, earned a bachelor's degree in history from Columbia."

The secretarial school she attended in the mid-1950s was New York's Katharine Gibbs School, a franchise that closed in 2011 after 100 years of business.

That it is called merely a "secretarial school" — a nameless one, at that — in Ryan's obituary does the institution a disservice, said Rose A. Doherty, of Massachusetts, who taught at Boston's Gibbs College before filling a series of dean positions culminating with academic dean.

Doherty's recently published book, "Katharine Gibbs: Beyond White Gloves," profiles the school's founder and provides a look inside the institution "known for its graduates who overcame the seemingly impossible hurdle of being female."

"Other schools might have had similar curriculum, but they did not have the same level of discipline, the same definition of quality," she said.

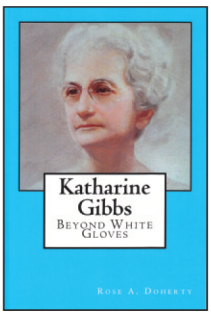
Before becoming a member of the Gibbs faculty in 1977, Doherty had her own very early encounter with the Gibbs standard of discipline and quality.

She was 12 years old, and friends with a girl whose sister was a graduate of the Providence school, the first Gibbs institution that opened in 1911. The school also had a campus in Norwalk.

"A group of us were dragooned into serving as match girls," she said. "Imagine being 12 years old and showing up in your regulation white shirt, black skirt, and stockings, and suddenly you're in a room filled with beautifully made up women in very 1950s fashion, all having a wonderful time. It was a world I had never seen before."

"Leave it to Beaver" was a lie, Doherty said. Most women didn't typically dress like the women she saw at Gibbs, their lipstick bright red and their hair impeccable. She was used to seeing mothers and their "serviceable" attire. They certainly didn't wear matching necklaces and earrings during the day, and makeup was for special occasions.

The dress code at Gibbs may be the most legendary thing about it. It was known for the white gloves female students wore, and reporters were still asking about them decades after coal stopped being used for heating and white gloves were no longer in fashion. While easy to treat as a peculiarity, the dress code was one of many critical



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standards students had to meet — and for good reason — it prepared them for the professional world.

"They were expected to dress for school as if they were going to work," Doherty said. "You often see people going into an interview in a suit looking like a 10-year-old, but if you had spent a year or two wearing professional clothing and making yourself up professionally each day, when you went to the interview you'd be completely comfortable looking. You'd also have a really developed wardrobe."

Gibbs students were also taught to dress for the job they wanted, not the job they had, which theoretically made it easier for prospective employers to imagine an employee in a promoted position.

But clothing was only one component of the professional training Gibbs students received. When Katharine Gibbs opened the school to make money and take care of her two sons after her husband died, the goal was to train male and female secretaries (called "typewriters" if they were women). When World War II took the men away, Gibbs capitalized on the new job market and created a women's school, training women to not only enter the work force, but succeed.

Doherty writes in "Beyond White Gloves" that Gibbs created an institution that combined a traditional liberal arts education with preparation for the modern business office by teaching students how to use the technology of the day: telephones, typewriters, comptometers, and Dictaphones. Gibbs also taught its students "soft skills," the catalogs advertising an atmosphere that would integrate working and middle-class students with those for whom "culture and proper behavior were second nature."

This was just another aspect of the training that would prepare the students to be comfortable in any environment. A Gibbs student, Doherty's book claims, "was trained to talk with company presidents, presidents of the United States, ambassadors, vendors, and maintenance personnel." They were "professional, not subservient, regardless of the rank, wealth, power, position, or prestige they encountered." A Gibbs secretary was always professional, always pleasant.

It's difficult not to immediately think of advertising secretary-turned-partner Joan of the AMC television series "Mad Men," who seems to perfectly exemplify the quintessential "Gibbs girl."

Above all else, Doherty said, Gibbs students were taught to strive for nothing short of excellence. "Stand above the crowd" and "Excellence in all you do" were more than the institution's tag lines; they were a way of life, she said. Although the training was secretarial before the curriculum expanded to include such subjects as word processing programs, hotel management, graphic design, and criminal justice, the opportunities it opened to women were monumental, Doherty said. Women may have entered the work force as secretaries, but many — such as Patricia Ryan — didn't see that as an end goal. It was merely an entry point.

Among the list of Gibbs students briefly profiled in Doherty's book are Mary Carr, secretary to Alfred E. Smith, who ran for president against Herbert Hoover in 1928; Katherine Towle, who went on to become Director of Women Marines; Mary Sutton Ramsdell, who later became one of the country's first state policewomen; and author Mary Louise Clifford, who was told by a foreign services recruiter that the best way to be in the foreign service would be to marry an officer, and who, after attending Gibbs, was recruited in 1949 by the CIA and trained in lock picking, codes, and photography.

"Katharine Gibbs opened the school at a time when a woman with a college education simply did not have any career possibilities," Doherty said. "She gave them the skills that they could use to get their foot in the door. One of the reasons I wrote the book is that a lot of people really don't understand how drastically things have changed, how much better things are for women now. Every young woman I know expects that she will have a chance at any job she wants or is qualified for; that was not always the case. People need to recognize that it wasn't that long ago that things were quite different."

"Beyond White Gloves" is available at Amazon.com. For more information about the author, visit: RoseADoherty.com