

The Golden Girl

BY SUSAN HVISTENDAHL '68

WHEN I LIVED IN NEW YORK CITY and told anyone that my alma mater was St. Olaf, more often than not the response was, “Oh, St. Olaf. Like in *The Golden Girls!*” For years, actress Betty White played the naïve, childlike character Rose Nylund on the popular television series, and Rose — a Norwegian American who hailed from the fictional farming town of St. Olaf, Minnesota — had made St. Olaf famous.

In 1989, Dan Jorgensen, then director of public relations for St. Olaf College, arranged for the St. Olaf Choir to visit the Hollywood set of *The Golden Girls* during their West Coast tour. Prior to the evening taping of the show, Betty White and Rue McClanahan (“Blanche”) surprised the audience — more than half of whom were St. Olaf Choir members — by coming onto the set and singing the college fight song, “Um! Yah! Yah!,” which Jorgensen had taught them earlier.

“Don’t any of you know this song?” White asked, and immediately every Ole joined in. It also happened to be White’s birthday, and the choir sang “Happy Birthday to Betty” in four-part harmony. White said that “after hearing those glorious voices, Rue and I crawled off the stage. It was such fun.”

Betty White reconnected with St. Olaf on May 3 and 4, 1992, with a two-day campus visit. Jorgensen remembers picking up Betty White and her assistant, Gail Clark, in Minneapolis and driving them to Northfield, where they planned to stay at the Archer House. As they neared Northfield, they came upon a farm dog sitting on the highway. White, a long-time dog-lover and animal welfare activist, worried the dog would be run over and insisted Jorgensen stop the car. White coaxed the dog off the road and into the ditch, ordering it to “Stay!” then returned to the car, remarking, “There! I feel better!” As they drove off, Jorgensen looked in the rearview mirror. The dog had already resumed his position on the highway.

Betty White’s St. Olaf visit was a whirlwind of activity, from attending a St. Olaf women’s softball game to attending both a St. Olaf Choir rehearsal and spring concert, where she once again joined the choir in singing “Um! Yah! Yah!” The next morning, White had breakfast at the Ole Store and toured the Northfield Historical Society museum. Upon seeing a photo of the outlaw Jesse James, she remarked, “Look at his eyes. Is it any wonder [Henry] Fonda played him?”

White returned to the campus in time for chapel and a talk by St. Olaf president Melvin George, who spoke on the topic “Becoming like Children.” President George concluded by thanking Rose Nylund “for reminding all Americans that being open, humble, dependent, and vulnerable is something to be admired, that naïveté is not all bad, and that happy endings are, in fact, what God had in mind all along when He made the world.”

White also met with St. Olaf student government leaders, was interviewed on WCAL, and treated theater majors to stories about her acting career “I feel like I’ve been seeing St. Olaf from the inside,” White told the students before leaving the campus. “It will make a whole difference in my Rose characterization, I can assure you. I won’t be as tentative. I will be surer-footed, because you really understand where Rose is coming from, and she really is coming from your values.”

When I later wrote Ms. White, requesting a photograph to use with a story about her trip to the college and Northfield, a picture and letter soon arrived in the mail. The letter read:



“We come from St. Olaf, we sure are the real stuff...”
The same could be said for Betty White, who twice joined the St. Olaf Choir for a rendition of “Um! Yah! Yah!”

Dear Susan,

Thanks so much for your nice letter. I remember my visit to St. Olaf very well. I was a little apprehensive, as I was afraid they would resent the fact that Rose wasn’t the brightest bulb in the chandelier, but they couldn’t have been warmer and more welcoming. To this day I have my Uff Da cup and shirt.

I remember meeting an exchange student from Germany who told me a story that made me laugh. He said that when he told friends that he was going to go to school in America, at St. Olaf College, they would say, “Oh, Golden Girls!” He would say no, and explain that St. Olaf was a school famous for its magnificent choir! And then they’d say, “Oh, we didn’t know the Golden Girls sang!!”

Please give my regards to all on your beautiful campus, and keep up that wonderful singing.

Warmest regards, Betty

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