



# Creating an Alumni Community

**R**osemary Jackson '84 is the architect of Vanguard University's alumni association and spent decades traveling the country to meet with alums and re-connect them to each other and to their alma mater.

During her twenty-four years as alumni director she created an alumni newsletter, held the school's first homecoming, published an extensive alumni directory and built a strong sense of community among VU alums.

"I always reasoned that if someone went to a school and gave a year or more of their life there, they wanted to be reminded of that good experience," she says. "It just took someone to bring people together."

Jackson was born and raised in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, Canada, where she showed an early talent for organizing groups of people. At 16, she created a successful Friday night children's church at the storied Elim Tabernacle Assembly church. During summers she directed the children's program at camp and traveled widely to conduct vacation Bible schools.

She and husband Keith Wright came to Pasadena in 1959 so he could attend Fuller Seminary. But at the end of their second year

there, he died suddenly of cancer.

"I can't tell you what I went through when my husband died. I was devastated," Jackson says. "I was so in love with Keith."

She was faced with a choice: return to Canada with her two-year-old son and raise him near family, or remain in Pasadena where she had made many friends and felt at home. Keith's last words to her helped her decide.

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"The night before he died, I said to my husband, 'What will I do if anything ever happens to you?'" she says. "He said just three words: 'Don't move hastily.'"

With that in mind, Rosemary chose to stay and continue working for the Assemblies of God southern California district office, where she met O. Cope

Budge. She then left to work at Fuller Theological Seminary, but Budge called in 1965 and asked her to be his secretary at Vanguard, where he was then president.

"I thought, that's what I want to do for the rest of my life: work in a college that is Assemblies of God-related," she says. "I felt it would be my next move and my final move."

She took the job and "was in my glory."

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“I was in an academic environment doing what I felt comfortable with and what I wanted to continue doing for my life’s work,” she says.

A year later she met **John Jackson ’44**, who moved out from Springfield, Missouri, to court and marry her.

“When I met John, it was like bliss all over again,” she says. “You go from loneliness and emptiness to having such a full life. I can only thank God, because I believe God puts love in our hearts.”

She served as secretary for three VU presidents, at each of their request, and on Labor Day weekend 1979, president Wayne Kraiss offered her an opportunity which would re-define her career. The school had received a grant from the federal government to establish an alumni office and hire an alumni director. Though Vanguard was sixty years old, it had nothing in the way of an alumni association. Kraiss felt that Jackson was the person for the job.

Jackson took the job — and cried for a month.

“I wanted to accept the challenge, but I was scared. I didn’t know if I could really make a go of it, and I knew if I didn’t, I would be without a job,” she says. “But John kept saying, ‘Of course you can do it.’ He was my cheering section.”

John also became her greatest resource. Having graduated from Vanguard, and attended five other colleges, including the University of Havana, he was always receiving alumni mail from them. John also knew many older Vanguard alumni who had attended when the campus was in Pasadena.

With his encouragement, Rosemary started with nothing but a list of 1,479 alumni names and addresses provided by the school, and many of those were outdated. With the help of student-workers and many alumni volunteers she began hunting down as many alumni as possible. She pored over transcripts and old yearbooks. She called alums and asked for their friends’ contact information. She scoured phone books and address directories. She appointed an alumni committee that included representatives from each decade, chaired by paralegal **Lois Horness ’67**, and they created a constitution and by-laws for the alumni association. This constitution was approved by the school’s administration.

There was immediate interest from alums, especially when she started a quarterly alumni newsletter to keep them in touch with each other and

(left) Jackson with a sign donated by the class of 1990. (below) Jackson visiting alum **Victor Thannickal ’83** at Oral Roberts University in Tulsa, Oklahoma, where he was employed.

with the University.

“It caught fire because everybody is interested in reading about their classmates,” she says.

Alumni membership and giving grew steadily. Soon the Jacksons hit the road, traveling the west coast in a little trailer to start chapter meetings. They met with alumni in homes, churches and restaurants, and slept in the trailer in church parking lots. Then they expanded into the Midwest.

“The number of chapters really grew, and alumni interest grew as well,” Rosemary says. “I established fifty-two chapters across the nation. I used to keep a huge map on my wall with pins in it.”

She organized the school’s first annual homecoming in 1981, and held class reunions, special all-family events and fund-raising banquets. All the effort paid off as people began to coalesce into a community.

“When alumni come back to campus, attend a class reunion or go to a chapter meeting, they pick up where they left off as students.”

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Rosemary Jackson, continued from page 4

says Jackson. “It could be thirty years and now they’re married with kids, but they reflect back to the happy time when they were students.”

Many alums established scholarship funds or left VU in their will or living trust.

“My whole philosophy was once you contacted alumni and established good relations, they would start giving,” says Jackson. “You didn’t have to go after them and ask for a lot of money.”

She compiled the school’s first alumni directory in 1990, and calls it “the most valuable tool that I ever gave to Vanguard.”

The most recent directory, completed by Jackson in 2003, includes an alphabetical listing with addresses and places of employment for thousands of alums by name, maiden name, class year and geographical location. Soon Jackson became something of an expert. Other colleges and universities contacted her for information, and she was one of the speakers at an alumni professionals conference at Lee University in Cleveland, Tennessee.

But she had some unfinished business to take care of as well.

Jackson had spent her life working to put others through school — two husbands, a son and two step-children. But in 1972 she and John decided it was her turn to complete her lifelong dream.

“I grew up in such poverty that I wasn’t able to get a college education,” she says. “The best I thought I could do was work at a college and help others get their education.”



(top) A teenage Jackson teaching children’s church at a camp meeting in Saskatchewan, Canada, and later taking VU students out for lunch (bottom).

But she began taking a class or two at Vanguard each semester until finally, in 1984, she graduated with her bachelor’s degree in business administration with a 3.84 GPA. She was later named the 2001 Alumna of the Year.

“[Former VU professor and artist-in-residence] Keith Ewing laughed one day and said, ‘If you ever graduate, you’ll have the longest transcript of anyone who has ever

attended,’” she says. “I felt like I had finished something that I had always wanted to do.”

On the top of her mortar board she spelled out, “Thanks, Jim, John and Brian.” Jim was the chair of the business department at the time, Brian was her son and John was her husband.

Later, in 2002, the alumni community she had helped to create became a critical support for her when John died suddenly of pancreatic cancer.

“Alumni came to my rescue,” she says. “**Daniel Amen** ’78, physician and director of the Amen Clinics, spent time with me. We had lunch often. **Randy Powell** ’77, director of counseling at Vanguard, listened to me, talked to me and prayed for me so many times. When I thought that my life was over, they helped me through the trauma and grief of losing John.”

In 2003, Jackson was named special assistant to the president for alumni relations. She retired in 2007 and married retired army chaplain John (Jack) Torp that same year. The two continue to travel and visit alumni across America.

“I’ve had a wonderful life, and Vanguard has been the best,” she

says. “I was on cloud nine the whole time I worked at Vanguard. I wanted to go to work every day. The alumni have become my dear, dear friends, hundreds of them. Even the two years I’ve been traveling with Jack all across the country, I call alumni everywhere I stop. You name a city and I can tell you who is there.”