Stay Connected

“Never relinquish the feeling of your first day at Harvard, or when spring at last comes to Cambridge. Bring that same wonder, excitement, and zest to each new day,” the new president of the Harvard Alumni Association (HAA), Carl Muller ’73, J.D.-M.B.A. ’76, told graduating seniors during his Class Day speech last June. “And, by all means, he added, stay connected. “Keep up with your friends and classmates, come back for reunions—and every once in a while just check in to see what is going on at the place.”

The HAA helps alumni do all of that. The organization supports nearly 200 Harvard clubs and Shared Interest Groups (SIGs) across the globe that are open to the more than 330,000 alumni. It runs the festivities during Commencement and reunion weeks, and helps recruit and interview College applicants, Muller says. Other activities include alumni networking (e.g., Crimson Compass, the HAA’s career-networking program) and educational trips with Harvard faculty members. “We’re going to be continuing those kinds of broad alumni engagement gatherings in metropolitan areas,” says Philip Lovejoy, deputy executive director of the HAA. Also continuing is research into “alumni perceptions of Harvard, how they related to the University, and how they are connecting with each other in general,” he adds. Focus groups have already been held in four U.S. cities and interviews conducted with alumni abroad. This summer, the HAA sent a survey to a random sample of up to 50,000 alumni. “We want to identify what we can be doing better,” Lovejoy says.

Muller himself will travel to Harvard clubs and meet with alumni throughout his tenure. That includes international excursions, such as the European club leaders’ meeting in Vienna in September, and future trips to South America and possibly Asia. “As Harvard becomes increasingly international, it is important to show the flag not only in America, but around the world,” he adds. “When Harvard shows up, people feel like they are being noticed and respected.”

An attorney in Greenville, South Carolina, Muller first got involved with the HAA as an alumni interviewer in 1973. He has held numerous and varied posts since then, ranging from president of the Harvard Club of South Carolina to class representative to the HBS Bulletin. Most recently, he was chair of the HAA nominating committee and vice president of the marketing and engagement committee.

In explaining his devotion to Harvard, Muller quotes David Rockefeller ’36, LL.D. ’69, who said, “Harvard opened my eyes to the world,” when discussing his $100-million gift to the College in 2008. “If Harvard did that for him,” Muller notes, “imagine what it did for me, coming from a farm in South Carolina in 1969.” He was among six from that state in his class when the “Northeast-centric sensibility” at Harvard was more pronounced than it is today.

“When I grew up in the South, that region was very much removed from the rest of nation for political and cultural reasons.”

A social-studies concentrator, he went on to practice law in various capacities. “I am in the courtroom and the boardroom,” he says. “I have served as defense counsel in capital murder cases and, on the other hand, put together transactions on Wall Street.” Much of his trial work involves defending First Amendment freedoms, but he also advises business clients on “how to start, acquire, finance, and eventually cash out of their enterprises.” He is currently finishing a two-year term as chairman of the board of South Carolina Legal Services, a firm of more than 50 lawyers that offers free legal services to more than 800,000 indigents. For 25 years, Muller also served on the board of the Phillips Wheatley Association, a non-profit organization in Greenville that fights poverty through education, athletics, nutrition, and the arts, receiving an award for this service.

Muller and his wife, Allison, have three children: Allidah ’05, Amelia ’11, and Wiley, a graduate of the University of Tennessee. The couple met on a blind date at Harvard. He was a proctor at Weld Hall. Allison, who had moved to Boston to work at the Museum of Fine Arts, met him there. She was initially skeptical of going out with a Harvard guy but “thought she’d give me a try,” he says. “She thought Harvard guys were stuck on themselves, snooty.”

Alumni who may want to meet Muller will find him on November 17, the day of the Harvard-Yale game in Cambridge, in a Stadium parking lot with his wife, cooking up barbecue. “We pack up a couple of large coolers of barbecue and bring it with us on the airplane and have it for all the undergraduates from South and North Carolina,” Muller says. “We have a grand time!”

This year, look out for the first-ever “barbecue challenge”—Muller versus Texas alumna Danguole Altman ’81, HAA director for clubs and SIGs and co-chair of the HAA clubs and SIGs committee. “We can do it better than they can,” Muller says, simply. Alumni are invited to judge the results, and Muller encourages them to stop by: “You can find us there because we’ll have the Texas and South Carolina flags flying high.”

~N.P.B.