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### **Mighty Impressive: After 38 years as dean, vice president, dancer, and friend, Janice Kassman retires. But her legacy lives on**

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*Colby College*

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*After 38 years as dean, vice president, dancer, and friend, Janice Kassman retires. But her legacy lives on*

By Gerry Boyle '78

An accomplished student and athlete from Colorado, Kevin Plummer '89 had been recruited to Colby to play soccer and lacrosse, and within weeks he'd made what he calls "the freshman all-pro team."

Academic probation. Social probation. "I just made really poor choices. For fourteen weeks in a row," Plummer said.

The result was a summons from Dean of Students Janice Kassman, a petite woman who sat behind her desk, face to face with the six-foot-three, 225-pound freshman.

"She said, 'I have two folders,'" Plummer recalled. "'I have a folder of the kid we admitted ... and, in this folder, I have the ----- who's sitting in front of me.' And she started to read all of the things I'd done my first semester. And she looks me right in the eye and she says, 'So we've got a choice. Either this good kid we admitted starts to show up. Or I kick this ----- out of Colby.'"

Said Plummer, now head of school at Tampa Preparatory School, "She was in my grill."

Plummer and Kassman have different recollections of the exact word Kassman used (Kassman recalls something more appropriate to a dean). But they agree on the resolution. Plummer promised the good kid would, indeed, show up. Kassman said if he did, she'd support him every step along the way.

For the next three and a half years Plummer did everything he could to prove he was worthy of Kassman's care and consideration. As he thrived at Colby academically and in sports (he was the College's first lacrosse All-American) and went on to a successful education career, Plummer continued to see the Colby dean as a role model and mentor. "She's the person I talked to about graduate schools. The person I talked to when I was asking my wife to marry me. The woman I called after my daughter was born. She took a chance on me and I will never be able to fully repay her for that.

"Janice sees the better in people, sometimes when they don't see it themselves."

It's a story told by many Colby alumni who encountered the dean at a low point in their lives and felt her lift them up with her steadfast—and sometimes puzzling—belief in their ability to be contributing members of the Colby community.

This same "chronic optimism," as Professor Margaret McFadden puts it, was brought to bear on everything that Kassman took on at Colby, from round-the-clock management of crises and tragedies to recruiting students of color and first-generation college students to co-chairing the Queer Task Force to advising the Broadway Musical Revue (she was also a regular performer).

But no more.



them and say, 'I'm the head resident, and you have to leave.' And they'd leave."

That was the beginning.

In 1974 Kassman accepted a one-year position as Colby's assistant dean of residential life. Moving quickly up the ladder, she ran head-on into the fraternity controversy, worked with student government, labored on College initiatives, was lampooned by the *Colby Echo*,

## "Janice sees the better in people, sometimes when they don't see it themselves."

*Kevin Plummer '89*

Kassman retired this spring, leaving Colby after 38 years, including a quarter-century as dean of students, five years as vice president of student affairs, and six years as special assistant to the president. In the course of her time on Mayflower Hill, she encountered thousands of students, many of whom became her steadfast friends and remain so today. "This was my family," Kassman said. "My holiday card list is very long."

**B**orn Janice Armo, she grew up in an extended Italian-American family in the Red Hook section of Brooklyn. In her early years Kassman lived upstairs from her grandparents' funeral parlor, next door to her parents' florist shop. This was a neighborhood so tight-knit that when 6-year-old Janice needed to cross the street, she would stand at the corner and wait for an adult—any adult—to come by. "I'd say, 'Will you cross me?' and I'd take their hand and they'd walk me across," Kassman recalled.

The family moved to Long Island when Kassman was 11, and she flourished in high school, attending SUNY Stonybrook and going on to earn her master's degree in French literature at Boston College. It was at BC that she became a head resident, defending a women's dormitory from panty raids.

"I would go up to these big football guys and I would look at

counseled students about everything from careers to homesickness, and for nearly four decades retained an indefatigable enthusiasm for a job that she saw as a 24/7 responsibility.

"There was always somebody who needed something," Kassman said. "There was always somebody I could send an e-mail to in the middle of the night and say, 'How are you doing?'"

Most of them did very well, eventually, thanks in no small part to the dean's tireless work on students' behalf. "They're just endlessly interesting to me," she said. "And entertaining and challenging and puzzling and frustrating."

Kassman threw herself into the job with characteristic fervor at a time when a dean of students at many colleges and universities was an unapproachable authority figure—the administrator who unilaterally decided a student's fate.

She could and did just that. But Kassman was just as quick to sit for hours by a student's hospital bedside, to talk to students about their family troubles, to assure struggling students that they could and would succeed at Colby.

And then help them come up with a time-management plan.

"She really wrote her own script," said Kassman's predecessor and mentor Earl Smith, "because she could not turn her back on a student who needed help."

Some administrators, Smith said, were taken aback by Kassman's willingness to personally step into any situation at any time. "She was the dean of students," he said. "Why was she up all night?"

The answer, according to Richard Uchida '79, who knew Kassman when he was a student head resident and later worked with her as a trustee: "She operated in a way where she felt she had personal responsibility for every human being on that campus."

A query to just a small number of alumni—Kassman was dean for 10,800 Colby students—unleashed a cascade of Kassman anecdotes and testimonials. For Uchida, now an attorney, it was the time he summoned her to Dana at 2 a.m. because a student was despondent, locked in her room, and was contemplating hurting herself. Kassman arrived, persuaded the student to open the door, and talked with her until the crisis had passed.

For Avery Roth '02 it was the morning of 9/11 when Kassman,

knowing Roth had family working in the area of the World Trade Center, marched into her French class. "Janice pulled me into her office and she sat me down and she let me use her phone to try to contact my family. She was a rock during a time of stress."

For Jay Donegan '81 it was senior year when he was head resident in Dana and his girlfriend at the time (and now wife of 32 years), Lisa Sukeforth '84, became pregnant. Donegan went to Kassman to inform her of the situation, ready to step down from his job if she felt he was no longer an appropriate role model.

"She was excited and supportive and totally onboard. In some respects—maybe proud wouldn't be the right word—but happy for us."

The baby was their oldest son, John. Four more children would follow, including Claire Donegan '12 and Sarah Donegan '14. "Janice has been part of our life ever since," Jay Donegan said.

The same can be said of many others. Marie Cerat '00, from Brooklyn, N.Y., was lonely and struggling in the classroom her first semester. She met with Kassman many times and was reassured that she belonged at Colby. Later Cerat, now working with children's services in New York City, would soar academically. "I probably would have left had I not had her."

They continue to correspond to this day.

In fact, Kassman has maintained close friendships with literally hundreds of alumni including some who did leave Colby—suspended by the dean. One of those students, Mark Edgar '00, met Kassman for the first time when he was hospitalized after excessive drinking before classes started his freshman year. "There was this woman standing over me," he recalled, "claiming to be the dean of students."

Kassman called Edgar's parents and continued to meet with him to make sure he was okay and that there wouldn't be a reoccurrence, he said. Then later in the semester Edgar was one of four first-year football players caught pilfering Christmas decorations in Waterville. The prank got him suspended for Jan Plan and ordered to do community service, he said. While he was living off campus that January, a family friend stayed in Edgar's dorm room with a friend during a ski trip. The friend was involved in an alcohol-related incident and Edgar was suspended for second semester.

"When she kicked me out the second time, she said, 'Mark, the last time I kicked a student out two times I danced at their wedding.' I was like, 'How dare you say that to me?'"

Even before Edgar returned to Colby the next year, he realized that Kassman, who he had disliked so much, was committed to helping him turn his life around. "Janice is fiercely committed to her values. She's very committed to the students and to Colby as a whole. She's tough. She's really tough. But she was committed to seeing me come out of that low point, and she worked with me. I had a renewed sense of responsibility."

Edgar spoke to groups of first-year students about his mistakes and how they could avoid repeating them. He achieved academically and went on to a successful career in investment banking. And, eight years after Colby, he and Kassman met again. "Here I am in Bermuda getting married to my wife, and who's there but Janice," Edgar said.

This was characteristic Kassman, meting out discipline while encouraging the student to learn from the experience and come back stronger.



*Top left, Janice Kassman in 1979 with, from left, Patrick Chasse, student activities director; Chris Noonan '78, assistant director of student activities; Earl Smith, dean of students. Above, Kassman (center) joins students in the first Feminist Fortnight run, in 1978. Left, Kassman poses with Mule mascot and friend Coy Dailey '01 during halftime at a Colby football game.*

**J**erry Crouter '78, an attorney who worked with Kassman on College disciplinary matters, recalled a case where the parents of a student victim demanded the perpetrator be thrown out of school then and there, without due process. "Janice looked them right in the eye and said, 'Look, you have to understand something. That student is my student, too.' It made them reflect. They got it, and the process worked," Crouter said.

"She had genuine compassion for the people who'd been victimized but also people who had been accused of wrongdoing."

Kassman calls these "stories of reclamation. Kids who got off to a bad start and then found their way and flourished." These were challenging situations but the dean didn't shy away from them, just as she squarely faced situations that were much more difficult.

These were the tragedies. Students badly injured. One student, Dawn Rossignol '04, tragically abducted and murdered. Kassman remains in touch with Rossignol's mother to this day. Another student, Kyawswar Win '05, a gifted physics student from Myanmar who drowned in a boating accident on Messalonskee Lake, near campus.

It was Kassman who broke the news to Win's parents, speaking to them in a conference call with a translator, an emergency service with which she was familiar through the work of her husband, emergency medicine physician Lawrence Kassman '69. She met the family at the airport, took them to view their son's body, helped them pick out an urn. It was Kassman who accompanied Kyawswar's father, Aye Win, to the lake to see where his son had drowned.

"As we were standing there, with a translator, he gave me a ruby ring," Kassman recalled. Aye Win said, "Kyawswar's mother gave him this when he came to this country and told him to give it to someone special."

Kassman was that special person. "She took care of everything," said Kyawswar's sister, Soe-Soe Win, now a physician in California. "Not like a person who is just responsible for doing those kinds of things—she did everything with her heart."

Now Kassman sends notes to the family on the anniversary of Kyawswar Win's death and on his birthday. When Soe-Soe Win was first in the United States and struggling with the new language and culture, she turned to Kassman for support.

For Kassman, it seems, there isn't any other kind of relationship. And she does not expect gratitude or any sort of quid pro quo. "It's not a calculated kind of thing that she's doing," said Beverly Nalbandian Madden '80, an alumni trustee and former head resident. "She's just there for everybody."

And she was, as dean of students, then vice president of student affairs, then special assistant to the president for external affairs.

Kassman has continued to correspond and meet with alumni

*Right, Janice Kassman detonates explosives during construction of Anthony-Mitchell-Schupf dormitory in 1996. Opposite, Kassman, with then Dean of Faculty Edward Yeterian, holds a muddy T-shirt, a memento of the last student swim across Johnson Pond, in 2003. Below, with Asma Husain '05, Amy Lu '09, Jingjing Zhou '07 during a trip to Shanghai.*



friends around the country and the world. She threw herself into her work with the Colby Achievement Program in the Sciences (CAPS), the Wabanaki-Bates-Bowdoin-Colby Alliance that links Colby with Native American communities in Maine, and the Posse program, which recruits students from public schools in New York City.

That transition was truly remarkable, said Josh Woodfork '97, who, as an overseer and trustee, watched Kassman evolve in her new role. "To switch her focus and be equally up to speed on the intricacies of working in these different areas, but also garner such success—she has the golden touch with all of these different issues that she's been connected to," Woodfork said.

**"To switch her focus and be equally up to speed on the intricacies of working in these different areas, but also garner such success—she has the golden touch with all of these different issues that she's been connected to."**

*Josh Woodfork '97*



**T**he Alumni of Color Network, recruiting of students of color, efforts to move from diversity to inclusivity—Kassman embraced it all, colleagues said. “She is absolutely an unsung hero,” said McFadden, the American studies professor, who has worked with Kassman on initiatives related to campus life and the curriculum, among others.

McFadden, associate professor of history and Christian A. Johnson Professor of Integrative Liberal Learning, and Kassman were co-chairs of the Queer Task Force, formed a decade ago improve the climate at Colby for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered members of the community. Kassman was crucial to its success, McFadden said.

“When resistance happened, she reassured people,” she said. “Because she was so widely respected and knew everybody, she was in lots of ways the ambassador of the task force.”

McFadden said Kassman made sure professors were included in campus life initiatives; she was not committed to hierarchy but to finding the best way to get a job done. “She is truly fearless,” McFadden said. “And she’s a classic lifelong learner. Think about how much the world has changed in the years since she’s been dean.”

Yes, it has. But Kassman, at her core, has not. In her last week at Colby, she spoke for two hours about her plans—an accreditation visit to the American College in Greece, reading, travel, nonprofit work perhaps—but mostly she talked about the students.


One is a virtuoso violinist, she said. “And he does photography for insideColby,” Kassman marveled. “And he’s premed.

“I would just love to go to all of these activities. I just came back from the women’s lacrosse meet. I went to the NCAA’s in Hartford. To see *Tartuffe*. Just to absorb them in all the ways they excel.”

Like a family member, Kassman is there for the good and the bad, happy occasions and sad ones.

President William D. Adams points out that Kassman was able to navigate and manage high-stress emergencies and overwhelming tragedies. “She was a rock in those instances where it’s not easy to be a rock,” Adams said.

Kassman also managed “sharp moments of disgruntlement”—including prohibition of the senior swim across Johnson Pond and the so-called “Champagne Steps”—and somehow still emerged with her personal relationships unscathed, he said.

“She’s beloved,” Adams said, with a tone of wonder. “She’s just one of those people who’s beloved.” 

## Speaking of Janice

“Janice now enters the justly celebrated pantheon of great women in Colby’s history—Mary Low, Louise Coburn, Ninetta Runnals among them. ... The modern history of Colby would have been much different, and certainly less successful, without her.”

*President William D. Adams*

“She is absolutely an unsung hero, in particular around recruitment of color and first-generation college students. A lot of the faculty talk about that—that this could not have happened without Janice.”

*Associate Professor of American Studies and Christian A. Johnson Associate Professor of Integrative Liberal Learning  
Margaret McFadden*

“It’s one of the most meaningful friendships I’ve had in my life. I think it’s one of the many things that makes Colby great.”

*Brad Reichel ’00*

“The thing I admire the most about Janice is that whoever she is dealing with she makes feel incredibly special. It doesn’t matter if it’s the chairman of the board of trustees, president of the school, or an incoming freshman, or even a kid who may have gotten in trouble. She’s got a big heart.”

*Jay Donegan ’81*

“It’s hard not to become friends with Janice.”

*Laurie Fitts Loosigian ’75*

“She’s one of the most unique people I’ve come across in terms of personalized attention and the joyful way she goes about her business.”

*Josh Woodfork ’97*

“If a student was suspended, she would genuinely tell the student she really hoped they would learn something from the time away, make it a positive experience, and then come back to Colby with a renewed outlook.”

*Jerry Crouter ’78*

“She helped me to put things into perspective [and was] always very supportive and encouraging. I didn’t feel as isolated or alone.”

*Marie Lorrain Cerat ’00*

“She fills you with enthusiasm and she fills you with hope.”

*Richard Uchida ’79*

“She’s disciplining people, making difficult decisions that affect people, and yet those people hold her in high regard.”

*Beverly Nalbandian Madden ’80*

“I’ve never known anyone with such boundless enthusiasm for anything and everything. She loves life. She loves students.”

*Tom Claytor ’85*