

Whittier College Remembered: A Brief College Memoir

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Note: This memoir was written for my grandson Reginald Burnham as he prepared for his Whittier College application. Since this writing early in 2026, Reg has decided to attend Whittier College and major in Kinesiology and Sports Management. He will begin his studies in August 2026. He will also be a member of one the baseball teams for the incoming Freshman class. He concluded a stellar baseball career with El Cerrito High School as the team leader in RBIs, home runs and fielding percentage. In addition, he had the third highest batting average, helping his team to first place in their league and a play off birth. Congratulation to Reg and welcome to being a Whittier College "Poet," a third generation Stelmach at Whittier.

My first Whittier memory was visiting my sister Barbara who was a student at Whittier. My recollection is that she received a "full ride" scholarship to Whittier. I remember her introducing me to a fellow student, Stan Sanders, who eventually became a Rhodes Scholar, studying at Oxford. He convinced me to attend Whittier because it had a very strong Political Science department, which was the major that most interested me, along with International Relations. I enrolled in 1963. Ironically, the next time I saw Stan was in London in the fall of 1965. I was then a sophomore at Whittier on my way to Copenhagen, Denmark on Whittier's study-abroad program at the University of Copenhagen. Stan was visiting the Whittier students, joining us in London from Oxford. He spent the night on the floor of my hotel room with two other Whittier students. I ended up spending a whole year studying in Copenhagen. I will say more about this experience below.

But before that time in Copenhagen, my sister Carolyn also enrolled at Whittier on a scholarship. So, by 1964 there were three Stelmach's at Whittier. Carolyn, like Barbara was a biology major. When I returned from Copenhagen for my junior year at Whittier, my sister Mary also was attending Whittier as an Art History major. My sister Barbara had graduated with her undergraduate degree but was living in an apartment in Whittier, working full-time as a high school teacher, and at the same time working on a master's degree in biology at Whittier. She was helping one of the professors do research on cancer. Now there were four Stelmach's at Whittier. The number of Stelmach's at Whittier grew to five, when my brother Allan's son, David Stelmach, attended Whittier in the late 1990's.

My personal highlights at Whittier centered around six major areas, my year studying in Copenhagen, playing baseball, student leadership activities with some fraternity involvements, meeting my future wife, Madelyn McKenzie, and shifting my interest to religion and theology. I will give some brief experiences to capture the meaning of these areas for my time at Whittier, including as an active and responsible alumnus.

Copenhagen: Study Abroad

I spent many hours out of class sitting at the same table that philosopher Soren Kierkegaard used in the Royal Copenhagen library. This was magnificent building that exuded knowledge and wisdom. My classes were exciting and challenging with European professors, very demanding and at the top of their field. My host families were loving and supportive. My time on a farm in the rural part of Denmark was a unique experience. But the time in the Library gave me a lifetime lesson of how important self-reflection is for personal growth and fulfillment. There are many other experiences that I could relate, from trips to Paris, Naples, Berlin and working at the US embassy teaching high school students about US History. But the main value of my time in Denmark exposed me to a world outside the US which not only helped me better understand other cultures but also gave me an appreciation of my own culture, prompting my journey for an “examined life,” to quote Socrates.

My main research focus while in Copenhagen was on the contributions the Scandinavian countries, Denmark, Norway and Sweden gave to the United Nations peace-keeping forces in African and middle east wars. Dag Hammarskjöld, a Swedish diplomat became the General Secretary of the United Nations. I bought his book of poems, “Markings,” and it was a constant companion while in Denmark. Unfortunately he died in a plane crash while in Africa working on peace negotiations.

At the end of the fall semester, my fellow students went back to Whittier. I decided to stay in Europe and attend language school in Germany at the Goethe Institute. While waiting for classes in Berlin to start I stayed in Denmark and worked on a dairy farm. I stayed in a room on the third floor of the farmhouse with only a space heater to heat the room. I woke at dawn with the hired hands and helped to bail hay and feed the cows. While on the farm I got word that I could attend the second semester in Copenhagen with students from Earlham College, another Quaker college in the US. Whittier would allow me to use my scholarship grant to attend the second semester. I was not yet ready to leave my European experience; so, I stayed for another semester.

Baseball

Returning to Whittier for the fall semester in 1966 I was ready to get back into baseball. I had hoped a year off would have allowed my shoulder that I injured my Freshman Year to heal. As the starting pitcher on the Freshman team, I was scheduled to pitch against UCLA's highly recruited Freshman team. I had pitched a practice game against the Whittier Varsity team and held them to no runs. We beat our own Varsity team. While warming up for the UCLA game, I felt a deep pain in my shoulder and could not throw without severe pain. Therefore, I spent my Freshman year playing either third base or first base. It was a satisfying year playing with a group of players who became my friends.

Now in my junior year, after returning from Copenhagen, I was going to test my pitching arm again. As it turned out, my arm did not heal. Because I was away one year all the positions were taken by veteran players, so I platooned at third and first base. This was okay for I was able to be part of team and help it succeed. We won our League championship. I played a role of kibitzing the other team and supporting my teammates. I got honored as the "bench jockey of the year." In hindsight, I am not totally proud of this award, but these were the days of almost anything goes in male sports in 1966. Of course, I promoted a different culture in the Albany Girls Softball League, which I co-founded in 1983 for my daughters, Amy and Megan. I wrote a 200 page memoir of my experience in found the league, which is still going strong today with over 300 girls participating.

In the summer between my junior and senior year I played on my Dad's semi-pro town team. I tried to pitch again but I realized that I would have to have surgery to repair my rotator joint in the shoulder. I still had a dream of playing some kind of professional baseball. So, in the fall of 1966 I had surgery on the acromion process in my shoulder. It was painful and not successful. Part of the acromion bone was removed. I did not recover in time for the spring baseball season. I realized I had to give up this boyhood dream. This was okay, for my life was changing with new interests.

I spent the summer in Mexico studying Spanish. My academic interests were evolving. My sister Mary, with a group of other women students, were renting my sister Barbara's apartment while she was away at UC Berkeley doing advanced work in biology. Mary invited one of her roommates, Madelyn McKenzie, home to Oceanside. Madelyn and I began dating. More on Madelyn below. I also began a process of changing my academic interests to philosophy and theology. So, I had many activities to replace baseball.

There are lessons to be learned from my college baseball career. First, conditioning is essential if one wants to perform at a high level. In high school I played sports year

around. In the winter I ran cross country and in the fall I played basketball. And then in the spring I played baseball. In the summer, as mentioned, I played baseball on my Dad's semi-pro team. I did very little weight workouts. So, when I decided in college to focus just on baseball, I had not maintained good conditioning before the spring baseball season. I began pitching full speed too quickly and hurt my arm. A consistent conditioning program with weight training would have allowed me to extend my baseball career, if not at pitcher, at least at another position. My teammate and roommate, Jim Colborn, was a backup pitcher on the Freshman team. After my injury he became a starter and eventually played ten years in the major leagues. He played basketball in college allowing his conditioning to remain at a peak performance.

Second, at some point one's sport career will be put in perspective with other interests that emerge in college. Take full advantage of all the opportunities for personal and intellectual growth. Fortunately, I did do this with my time in Copenhagen, with friends and other campus activities. You never know where explorations in college will lead you.

Student Leadership

I was able to expand my horizons in college with some key involvements beyond my year abroad, which I have already described. In my junior year I was a section leader for the freshman general education class where students discussed the symbolism in Herman Melville's novel, *Moby Dick*. I also became a Proctor of one of the men's dorms. This helped cover my cost of books and gave me leadership experience. I was also a Teaching Assistant for one of the history professors. I learned much from working firsthand with a Professor.

I had joined a fraternity my freshman year, The Lancer Society. Whittier does not have the typical "Greek" fraternities on campus. As a Quaker school, no national organizations were allowed. This, therefore, prohibited ROTC from being on campus. The Quakers are a peace church. I met many of my close friends in the Lancer Society, and many remained close even to this day. I was not a big fraternity person, but I did help lead a pledge class in my junior year, working to instill a different culture in the pledging process.

In my Senior year I engaged more in student politics as the student council Academic Coordinator and writing for the campus newspaper. I organized a process where professors could be evaluated by the students. This was controversial at the time. Today there are many on-line sites that do this. Though often abused, it did open the door to more accountability by professors.

I also wrote movie reviews for the campus newspaper and an occasional editorial. One editorial criticized the campus for sponsoring a right-wing singing group, "Up With People." The group was an early version of the simplistic and narrow white nationalism that we see today in the MAGA movement. My editorial got the student council Social Chairman in trouble, for she was responsible to host the group while they were singing. The Social Chairman had to go before the Board of Trustees to explain the criticism of the group that was galvanized by my editorial. Madelyn and I were by this point engaged and she was the Social Chairman. In effect, she had to defend her future husband before the Trustees on the grounds of academic freedom and free speech. Fortunately, Madelyn shared my views about the group and of course my first amendment rights. This was not a simple task given that the Quakers in Southern California were more conservative than East Coast Quakers. Remember former President Richard Nixon was a graduate of Whittier. His friend, Bob Hope the comedian, was a commencement speaker. A well-known conservative Republican.

Madelyn

I knew Madelyn since my Freshman year. She dated a number of my Lancer Society friends. I also had a girlfriend my Freshman and Sophomore year in Copenhagen. In my Junior year my girlfriend, two years older than me, went off to graduate school and we lost being in touch. In my Junior year I often saw Madelyn at campus activities. We were friends. We almost weekly saw each other at the Chapel service on campus. Many times, we were the only people attending. The sermons were meaningful, and the organ music was excellent. After chapel we would talk about the sermon as we went to lunch together. Her interest in religion led me to invite her to the theological discussion groups I organized. My academic interests were joining with my commitment to my Christian faith. Yet in the 1960s there was wide ferment on the meaning of the Christian faith in the modern world. I was beginning to expand my view of what my faith meant. Organizing discussion groups on campus helped me explore these personal questions. I will say more about this shift in the next section.

Having Madelyn in these conversations allowed me to get to know her. However, it was not until the summer after returning from Mexico that I began to think about her in more serious ways. This is when I encouraged my sister Mary to invite her to our home in Oceanside. After dinner we sat on our front porch until midnight just talking, but the next day we realized a deeper interest. The fall semester of our senior year started a few weeks later. Our first date was at Dodger baseball game. Her family had season tickets to the Dodgers. We began dating and then in the spring of 1967 we got engaged.

During this year I applied for a Rockefeller Fellowship to study theology. I received the Fellowship which allowed me to study at any theological school of my choice. I considered, Yale, Union and Harvard. Once I got the fellowship, which also included a living stipend, I proposed to Madelyn. The choice of schools became a joint decision. Madelyn was a third generation Californian who was very much attached to California. Living in New York at Union Seminary or in New Haven at Yale Divinity School were not options for her. Harvard was the joint decision, for Cambridge was a more acceptable living situation. After two years at Harvard and a year in Geneva, Switzerland at the Ecumenical Institute, Madelyn was ready to go back to California. By the summer of 1970 we were in Berkeley at the Graduate Theological Union where I pursued my Ph.D.

Whitter played a big role in finding a person who shared my values. I was lucky that this compatibility worked for a relationship of 50 years which produced children, sons in laws, grandchildren and many friends.

Shift to Theology

More about my shift from studying Political Science and International Relations to religion theology and ethics is important to understand, especially about the opportunity of a college experience in a liberal arts college, like Whittier.

As an eighteen-year-old entering college we think we have to know what we want as a career the rest of our lives. This is not very realistic. But our society and our need for financial security pushes this decision on young people. The good news is that in a liberal arts college or any college for that matter, you can change your mind. Once you get exposed to new ideas and better understand yourself and your vision for what you want out of life can and perhaps, should change.

In Copenhagen I still was on a track to some type of diplomatic or international career. I was very interested in the work of the United Nations. By my junior year, I thought I would specialize in Latin American studies. My uncle, aunt and cousins were all missionaries in Latin America. I got an interest in their work. All through high school I was active in my church, influenced by my Pastor and youth group leaders. When in college I always attended church when home for visits or during the summer. Religious practice was part of who I was. Therefore, as I mentioned above, theological questions deepened as I tried to integrate secular academic thought and religious practice.

My Pastor was a highly educated man with a doctorate. He was an intellectual. A youth group leader, a Marine and heir to the Brooks Bothers fortune was a big influence on me. He had received a Rockefeller Fellowship to study at Union Seminary. Both encouraged me to think about the ministry and apply for the Rockefeller Fellowship.

This was a fellowship that gave students not majoring in theology to consider the ministry. These discussions and my own faith journey coincided with my disillusionment with the direction of the political science field. Increasingly social science in general was mimicking the natural sciences, wanting to be a science. Notions of religion and even ethical decision making took a back seat to “real research.” One paper I wrote for a political science class was to figure out a way to predict revolutionary movements in order to make sure they did not happen. There was no consideration for the merits of the new movements. My professor was so impressed with this paper that he wanted to send it on to the leading theorist at UC Berkeley. I then realized that I did not want to be part this type of research. Some field in the humanities was more meaningful for me. I then made the shift to theology and ethics.

Fortunately, I got significant support from the Leadership of Whittier and other professors to make this shift and support my application for the Rockefeller Fellowship. One professor in a political philosophy class suggested that one of my papers dealing with “the end of ideology” in the modern world was the best undergraduate paper he had ever read. This was speculative paper analyzing the shift in the way the modern world now functioned with greater openness to ideas rather than being tied to narrow power-oriented world views. Of course, this is still possible and even more dangerous is that we are in a reactionary phase of narrow autocratic ideological positions.

The dye was cast. I needed a new way to express myself that integrated my intellect and my religious practice. Fortunately, I had a college experience that validated this shift.

Responsible Alumnus

My Whittier story did not end with my graduation. Madelyn and I often went back for various reunions and made modest financial donations for many years. When we had significant incomes, our donations increased.

More significant contributions to Whittier occurred when Whittier was re-doing its science building. It was first built in 1967, the year Madelyn and I graduated. It was dedicated by her Father, Reginald McKenzie, who was the CEO of Aerojet General, a major donor to the building. Then in 2017 the building received a multi-million-dollar upgrade. I organized two \$25,000 donations to name two of the rooms. One for my sister Barbara who had died several years before and the other for Madelyn who had just died. Both were biology majors. This was a chance to give back to a school that had given me so much. All my siblings and their families attended the dedication of the Science building. I remember how much Reg (yes Reg is named after his great

grandfather) enjoyed being there as we were shown around campus as VIP guests in a golf cart.

No doubt due to these donations I was appointed to the President's Council. This was a group of alumni that informally advised the President. I served on the Council for two years. In 2018 Margot Wenger and I married. We both attended these Council meetings and the formal dinners at the Presidents home. On one visit Margot and I carried ten boxes of baseball book up the stairs to the Baseball Institute. I donated these books to the Institute. These visits gave both of us a more intimate view of the issues facing the college. At this point Whittier was in an excellent position financially with a strong vision for the future. Margot and I also attended my 50th reunion at Whittier. Today we speculate on what the next chapter might be for our involvement with Whittier. Like Margot's liberal arts college experience at Beloit College, we have hope for the Whittier's future. Will there be another "Stelmach" in attendance at Whittier? [Yes!] But what is most important is that Whittier will continue to play its role as one of the nine major Quaker Colleges in the US, which include, Haverford, Swarthmore, Earlham and Bryn Mawr and George Fox.

Retrospective on the value of my education at Whittier

At the time I was a student in my late teens and early twenties, I am sure I did not realize the importance of my liberal education at Whittier. In thinking about how it prepared me for life and my future graduate education, it is clear that I was fortunate to have Whittier as my educational foundation. The subtle yet very real Quaker values of simplicity, collective decision-making and great respect for individuals was profound for developing the character of the students, which I gained while at Whittier.

Three images capture the values that were formative for me. One was the building of the new football stadium when I was a Freshman. The President, Paul Smith, was guiding the Dean of the College, Roy Newsome, while he was driving a tractor grading the soil for the new field. Here were the top executives for the college doing mundane tasks. The irony is that after Whittier cancelled its football program in 2022, I along with my Lancer Society colleagues donated to a fund to restore football. It will now have its first season this year in 2026, reviving the work of Smith and Newsome.

The second event was my application for the Rockefeller Fellowship program that solidified my entrance to Harvard Divinity School. President Smith took an interest in my shift to theology and personally wrote my letter of recommendation to the committee

interviewing candidates. This helped to impress the Rockefeller Committee; it was even mentioned it at my interview.

Another personal attention from the college Leadership is worth mentioning. In my Junior year I was very sick. For weeks I could not leave my dorm room. As it turned out I was suffering from a bout of Tuberculosis. This impacted my classroom work. I did not show up for my Physiology final exam. The Dean of the college, Roy Newsome, invited me into his office. He was concerned about me. He also knew about the achievements of my sisters and my own work on campus. He gave me a second chance. I was given an “incomplete” and allowed to take the course over. This type of compassion was typical of many of the Professors at Whittier.

What Whittier offered was a chance to explore one’s interests, allowing the flexibility to evolve as a student. I entered as a Political Science major and ended up in speculative fields of the humanities, political theory and religious studies. I credit much of this to the expansive General Education program that included a logic course, “Design for Thinking,” and Western and Eastern modes of thinking and knowledge. Each part of the General Education program fostered more than just knowledge, it focused on critical and expansive thinking in the context of understanding the importance of an ethical life, knowledge *and* character formation. I had a “liberal” education at the Undergraduate level, which allowed me to specialize in my Graduate studies. I was lucky to have Whittier as a foundational experience not just for education, but for life in general.