



The Architect of People

Stacy Bourne '85, architect, mentor, daughter, gardener, coach, and instigator of social change hasn't changed much since she first came to school at Mary Institute in fourth grade, but the size and scope of her dreams, and the impact she makes on the world, has increased exponentially.

She's still always on the go (one of the reasons her mother moved Stacy and her brother, **Sterling '83**, to private school), more comfortable outside than in, and excited to meet and work with new people.

Bourne had skipped a grade in her city public school and admits that she and her brother, who had also skipped a grade, were starting to get into trouble. They were with older students and bored in class much of the time. Sterling went first, landing at St. Louis Country Day School, and since Bourne wanted to do everything her big brother did, she soon found herself at Mary Institute right next door. She laughed as she recalled the change. "I have to wear what? A dress? Can we rethink this a little?" The transfer was perfect for Bourne, teaching her exactly what she needed to corral her energy and play to her strengths.

"My mind goes 150 miles per hour, but I'm grounded," she said. "Mary I made me grounded, taught me to think and plan. It was a really wonderful opportunity to plan long-term and to set goals and achieve them." She was an outstanding athlete and a self-described mediocre student, landing in Friday and Saturday detention for "goofin' off." Once she had to fill an entire blackboard with the words, "I will not throw notes across the hall." She picked up a lot of lessons, though, that she carries with her even today.

Mrs. Miller, the first teacher Bourne had upon entering Mary I, made an impact. "At the time I thought she was difficult," Bourne said, "but as an adult, I can appreciate the lessons she



taught me, including proper English and diagramming sentences and how you present yourself. I have come to really appreciate her a lot." Later, her basketball and track and field coach, Mr. Llufrio, helped her turn excess energy into success in the athletic arena. He became one of Bourne's first mentors, and she enjoyed reconnecting with him at her 20th class reunion.

Perhaps it was a college counselor who unwittingly made the biggest difference in Bourne's life. With Sterling's encouragement, she took a drafting class at Country Day, and it was in that class that she began to see how she could use her interest in art and geometry to build a career. Her teacher, Mr. Hanewinkel, kept her engaged by changing up the class each day. She quickly saw how she could use art to make a living, and began applying it to other parts of her life. "At the time, I had a little job at McDonald's," she said. "I decided the store was designed incorrectly and laid it all out and took it to my boss." Her boss admitted he had never seen anything like that before, and Bourne knew she was onto something. Her next project was to design a house for her grandmother who used a walker. She knew nothing about ADA compliance, just that everything needed to be bigger and wider to accommodate the walker. Senior year she designed a community center for her north St. Louis neighborhood. Clearly, giving back through architecture was in her blood.

She took this career path back to her college counselor at Mary I, and after the counselor told her, "Stacy, girls

don't become architects," Bourne was determined to prove her wrong. Bourne cuts her some slack today. "She was in her 60s and the chance of her seeing a woman architect was next to none," she allowed. "She was trying to give me a reality check, but I was dead set on becoming an architect since 10th grade after she told me that."

"The fact that I got to do something different and it came out of my brain, not some formula, appealed to me," she said. "I could do this every day; I really love it. It's a combination of art, creativity, and geometry, and between those three things, I was good." She used her love of art to paint the senior lounge, perhaps her favorite place to hang out indoors (outside, you'd often find Bourne with the dolphin statue in the Beasley playground). "I love all things art—painting, pottery, blown glass, watercolors, and pottery—so I enjoyed changing that space as much as possible."

She also learned how to interact with people from all walks of life at Mary I. Coming from the Natural Bridge and Goodfellow area, which was predominantly black, she was now immersed in an entirely different world. "It was a great integration into white America," she said. "I can work with everybody, any race, culture, age...I got you. All of that was broadened with my experience at Mary I." She credits the School with teaching her how to communicate effectively, how to stop and use her brain rather than following where the wind blew. She learned to be discerning, to notice differences, and

Bourne's senior yearbook is full of images that show how involved she was in school life.

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to take culture and background into account when interacting with others. "Everybody's carrying something but we tend to think everybody lives like us and they don't," she said. "We had white, Armenian, and Asian students, and that's when I learned to sit down and talk to others, to ask questions."

Armed with an arsenal of energy, an idea that she could make an impact on the world, and a firm foundation of Mrs. Miller's English lessons, morals, values, and "those things I know now come half from home and half from your school environment," she headed to Tulane University in Louisiana. Her choice of college led her directly to her career when, shortly before graduation, she was hired by a Tulane alumnus with an architectural firm in the Virgin Islands. The islands had just been battered by Hurricane Hugo, which left behind utter devastation. Bourne hadn't planned on moving from the continental U.S.; in fact, she had counted on landing somewhere, anywhere, and then seeing the country by car. With only one job

offer in hand, she moved to the islands and soon thought, "This isn't going to cut it. You can do everything there in seven days," she said, "and when you're 23, that's not enough." What was enough, though, was the work. The hurricanes kept coming, which brought more work that Bourne found interesting and fulfilling.

Once a hurricane devastates a community, the people affected need much more than to simply rebuild what they lost. Bourne sees her work as a vital part of social change: hurricane-resilient architecture sets communities up for long-term sustainability despite the ravages of climate change. "I've been in the Virgin Islands for over 30 years, and what I've come to understand is that I could fix your house and my mom's house and my house, but that doesn't help our community. Our *whole community* needs to be restored, so it's bigger than fixing random homes. It's about fixing communities into reliability, ensuring banks, churches, stores, and schools are resilient and ready. It's up

to communities to tell us what they need." With every project, she carefully considers other factors that may need mitigation. Is the building in a flood plain, or on a shore where it will constantly get battered? What happens when the sea level inevitably rises?

She also takes a pragmatic approach to calculating the costs of rebuilding sustainably: is the investment in the project worth the outcome? She sometimes counsels clients to save their money and move to higher ground or out of the area entirely. "Hurricane recovery takes five years," she explained, "and when the next storm comes—not if, but when—will you be more resilient? Are you able to leave a legacy? When your home is destroyed, it impacts generational wealth." Storms not only damage housing and infrastructure, Bourne notes, but they widen the socioeconomic gap if we can't restore communities.

By the time she was 26, Bourne had studied hard, passed the Architect Registration Examination, and earned her license. By 27, her boss followed his wife home to France, and Bourne was on her own, having inherited the remaining projects and his company. "I had to learn on the fly how to run a business. I had worked with the clients under his leadership, and I did the work, but what I didn't understand the business aspect," she said. She found a mentor to help, and The Bourne Group was launched. She went on to earn an MA in Architecture and Urban Design from Washington University, and an MA in Architecture from Tulane. She had thought that hard

A photo from one of Bourne's project proposals: restoration of the Reichhold Center for the Arts at the University of the Virgin Islands.





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work and perseverance would result in arriving, as in “you set a goal and you arrive.” What she learned was much more complicated. “The truth is that life is the journey, not the arrival,” she said. “When I talk to young people, I talk about a continuous process. Life is not a simple checklist; it goes on and on.”

Perhaps what kept Bourne in the Virgin Islands so long was that she took time to listen to the people there, learning more about them. The habit she learned at Mary I led her to become personally invested in her clients’ success. She noted that the common theme after devastation, after asking, “what am I supposed to do?” was “we left because we had nothing.” She met people who had been out of their homes for years after a hurricane, who thought their houses were constructed of concrete and instead learned they were wood stud, which doesn’t resist hurricane-force winds. “I worked on compiling all that in a way that made sense so as we move forward, we can help people in meaningful ways,” she said.

Bourne can’t recall a favorite project, because they all start out as favorites. Perhaps her favorite project is whatever she’s currently working on. At the time of the interview, the Bourne Group was in the final signing stages for their largest hurricane resiliency project

yet, and she was enthusiastic about an increased ability to effect change. It’s a partnership with a client, and offers an opportunity to rebuild hurricane shelters on a scale she’s not able to do individually. She sees the project as the starting point, and what they learn from it can be used across the Gulf states in the U.S.

In the meantime, she has moved back to St. Louis full-time to take care of her mother, blending her family of two dogs with her mother’s two. “Four dogs is a lot of dogs,” she laughed, “especially in one area.” She recently began a coaching program called Inspired by Stacy, where she mentors licensed women in architecture to grow their firms. She attended a conference last year where she learned that according to 2020 statistics, only 23% of architects are women, and 89% of architects don’t have a business plan. This, to Bourne, much like her work in the Virgin Islands, is about creating sustainability and resilience for marginalized groups.

She’s also trying to figure out if she can garden in the midwest like she did in the Virgin Islands. “I grew all my own food,” she explained, rattling off a list of produce that would make the Jolly Green Giant envious: lettuces, collard greens, eggplant, bell peppers, rosemary, thyme, mint, corn, passion

fruit, mangoes, papayas, cucumber, kale, and tomatoes. “I don’t even eat eggplant and tomatoes,” she confessed. “I just wanted to see if I could grow it.” She gives away everything she doesn’t eat herself, and enjoys seeing others benefit from her work. “I like to see it germinate, fight to come out of the ground,” she said. “It reminds me to come out of the ground. When I see it bloom, that means something is coming. It’s the fruit of your labor, of what you’ve invested. I like the analogies that it makes to life.”

Bourne advises younger generations to be honest about needing help. She said, “The minute you have enough courage to open your mouth and be honest, it brings more opportunities to you, and more motivation. We just need to broaden our brains.”

Stacy Bourne has spent her lifetime broadening her brain, adapting to what life throws at her on her journey, and finding ways to help others along the way. “I don’t want to do meaningless work,” she admitted. “I’m at the point where I work on things I want to work on. That’s why it’s good to diversify... you love all your projects.” She’s an architect for sustainability and resilience, of course, but perhaps more than that, she’s a builder of people and communities.