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Ron Lisnet

Allen Fernald

Sally Fernald

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S6E10: How has UMaine impacted Allen and Sally Fernald and vice versa?

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Allen and Sally Fernald of Camden, Maine have long been advocates for the University of Maine. Since graduating in 1954 and 1955, the owners and publishers of Down East Magazine have donated to various capital campaigns, sponsored art galleries and poetry readings, and led alumni groups and fundraising drives.

In this week's episode of "The Maine Question," the Fernalds discuss their lifelong relationship with their alma mater, and how the state and UMaine have evolved overtime, including the university's development into a top-tier, nationally recognized research institution.

Transcript

[background music]

Allen Fernald: The University of Maine got me to be curious, to be able to talk with strangers, to appreciate what they were interested in, and to become quite friendly with them.

Sally Fernald: I think, also, it taught both of us to be interested in a lot of different things. We both had a liberal arts education, which led us to be interested in history, and in writing, in science. We had excellent teachers. We love that.

Ron Lisnet: Allen and Sally Fernald. UMaine class of '54 and '55 respectively, talking about their education, and how it's set them up for a rich and varied life and career. Most notably as the owners and publishers of "Down East" Magazine. I'm Ron Lisnet. This is "The Maine Question" podcast.

The University of Maine has many noteworthy alums who stay involved with their alma mater and give in a variety of ways. It's hard to think of anyone who has been more associated with UMaine than Allen and Sally Fernald, donating to various capital campaigns, sponsoring art galleries and poetry readings, attending events, leading alumni groups, and fundraising drives.

They've also been involved in the work of Habib Dagher and the Advanced Structures and Composites Center on developing Maine's offshore wind energy capacity. All three of their children attended UMaine as undergraduates or graduate students.

As they hit their late 80s and enter their 90s, they're still active and involved. The University, of course, has changed with the time since their graduations in the mid-'50s. It's now a major public research institution that educates young people and addresses the needs of our time.

Since taking ownership of Down East Magazine in 1977, the Fernalds have seen those changes mirrored in Maine and in the publishing world.

Down East Magazine evolved from a publication that basically promoted Maine as a tourist destination, to one that reflected real life in Maine, and dealt with its bright spots and its challenges while still celebrating the state's beauty and traditions.

The Fernalds have been uniquely positioned to observe how Maine has changed and how the university has grown.

In today's episode of The Maine Question, we step outside some of our usual topics that document UMaine's research and creative achievement and the people who do it, and visit with Allen and Sally Fernald as they reflect on a life lived in Maine and staying connected to the University of Maine.

Allen and Sally, I want to thank you so much for taking a little time to share your stories with us. Maybe take us back. Let's start here. Take us back to where you grew up. When you came to the University of Maine, what was your major? How did you decide to come and attend college at the University of Maine? Allen, maybe let's start with you.

Allen: I grew up in Haverhill, Massachusetts, graduated from Haverhill High School, and applied to the University of Maine where my brother and his wife, he was a vet, were living. University of Maine had been in my family's background because my dad was in the paper business. He didn't go to college.

A friend of his was very active at Orono and was in the same paper business. Invited my father. They, as two couples, got together. He had been up to the University of Maine. My brother was already there. I never looked anywhere else.

Ron: What was your major?

Allen: I majored in psychology, but I also had a minor in history.

Ron: Sally, how about you? Where did you come from before you came to UMaine? What was your major?

Allen: I grew up in Southwest Harbor. I was the oldest of five girls. I thought I wanted to be a journalist. I looked up to see what would be a good journalist school. I think it was the University of Michigan. I said to my dad, "I think I'd like to go to the University of Michigan and study to be a journalist." He said, "I can only afford to send you to a local school."

I said, "Oh, OK." It was a half-formed teenage idea. I knew I wanted to go to college. I wanted to spread my wings and know more about the world. Southwest Harbor is a wonderful place to grow up but I was ready for a university. I applied and was accepted.

Ron: Here we are all these years later. Can you tell us how you both met?

Sally: [laughs] Whose version of the story?

[laughter]

Allen: My version.

Sally: OK.

[laughter]

Allen: My freshman year, I never had a date, because the campus was loaded with veterans who had a stipend, Buick convertibles, handsome physiognomy, because of all their training. Every time I'd ask a girl for a date, she'd say, "Oh, that's awfully nice, Allen, but Captain so and so with his Buick convertible is taking me to Bar Harbor for lobster." That was that. [laughs]

My sophomore year, I had pledged to a fraternity. I came back a week early to help open the fraternity house. I went to the freshman dance mixer. I shouldn't have been there. Partway through the evening, I spied this girl. I started across the floor to ask her to dance. Somebody got there first. It happened twice more.

They played last dance of the evening. I said to myself, "Well, I don't know why, but I want to dance with that girl." I went over the floor. She was dancing with somebody she knew and was very happy. Tapped him on the shoulder and said, "Cutting in." That was the first of it. Now here we are in our dotage. We've been ever since.

Ron: Wow. That's great. You, over the years, have stayed involved with the university in a number of ways. Maybe you can talk a little bit about why is that? What has kept you involved with UMaine even before that freshman dance?

Allen: I had a good relationship with a number of professors and stayed in touch occasionally. When we came to Maine, which we did every year on vacation, I would get in touch with some of them.

Sally: We weren't as active when we lived out of state. When we moved back to Maine in 1977, we both became very interested in the university. Our children -- Melissa and Tom -- both went to the university as undergraduates. Bob did his graduate work at the University of Maine.

Arthur Johnson was the president when our daughter went. This is just one kind story. He had had a daughter also named Melissa that died. He was a wonderful man. We became friends. I think that anyone who knew him would admire him and want him for a friend. We've met so many people.

The university people, to us at least, since we were potential donors, of course, but they also were kind, friendly, and interesting. It was fun to be with them. That wasn't the only reason we gave to university.

Allen: One of the reconnections was as an alumni, when they were doing fundraising, they would call on alumni to have teams in various states. The first team that I got on, we were living in New Jersey.

Sally: Oh, I didn't know. I forgot it.

Allen: Then a fundraiser. They nicked me again when we moved to Connecticut. When we came back to Maine, of course, I was hooked.

[laughter]

Allen: That was the first of getting re-involved. I reconnected with a number of my friends who were professors still there. One thing led to another and I stopped being on committees, working on fundraising, and attending events up there when they brought the opera or when they...

Sally: The concerts.

Allen: Special concerts.

Sally: The plays that they put on, we had season tickets to the place.

Ron: Certainly the University of Maine has had to grow, change, and stay relevant in terms of how it goes about its business. Entrepreneurship and then R&D and all those things are at the forefront now.

You got involved with Down East Magazine in 1977. Can you talk about adapting to new times, new things going on since you took over the magazine? Has that been something that's been important to you to keep it relevant and current?

Allen: At that time, when we bought it, Down East was published 10 times a year. It could only have one folio in the whole magazine that was in four-color. The first thing we did was up it to 12 times a year. First 11 and then 12. We did that over a two-year period.

The customers were happy. They saw it more. Of course, they paid more. It went on and also changed its editorial. We moved from being down home-ish to being a more professional magazine. It had excellent writers. The technical production of the magazine was upgraded.

We went to a different printer. We could get four-color throughout. The shipping to individual customers was more reliable and done right at the printers. Those things all added together. In the meantime, we started other magazines to put into the stable.

Ron: One feature of Down East Magazine, of course, is the beautiful photography and the feel of the paper. You mentioned paper in terms of folks that you were involved with here at the university and of course, the Pulp and Paper Foundation, chemical engineering, the forestry industry. Papermaking is a big aspect of what goes on here.

Can you speak to that in terms of looking for that quality that Maine is known for and the paper that was important to your magazine?

Allen: The ability to have color throughout was a major move. One of the first places that we changed to was the paper mill in Bucksport, which also did the paper for National Geographic. You know what the quality of that is?

Ron: Sure.

Allen: Of course, that mill is gone. Technology has moved away from their style.

Ron: The story of the state of Maine, the culture of Maine, and everything that that goes on here, is that what you try to portray in the magazine?

Allen: It's a much more sophisticated magazine. We don't do shipwrecks, old sailing schooners, and that. We like to have some feature of a person who's making a living here unusually. We obviously look at the vacation opportunities here in Maine, which then says museums. It says mountains. It says sailing. It says fishing. It says hunting.

Sally: Where to stay and to eat.

Allen: We've expanded from just selling magazines to selling Maine adventures. Go out with a Down East photographer. Spend three days with a Down East photographer in a small town you never heard of, on an island, or sailboat races.

There are activities for them to come here and participate in more than being a viewer of Maine.

Sally: People say to me and to Allen, "I love your magazine because it's always the same." If you looked at the magazine, they wouldn't like it if it had stayed always the same. It gets too boring.

Allen: Technology also enables us to do things. When we bought the company, every subscriber was on a three-by-five card with the names of their children, their grandmother, or where they like to stay. I brought in the first PDP-35 computer which was on big desks. That was so different.

They used to call up. A girl out there in a card file would say, "Oh, yes, Mrs. Jones, how's your husband?" [laughs] We can't do that anymore.

Ron: Customer service. We've talked about being adaptable to changing times. You have to have that base. Can you talk about how your UMaine education prepared you to go into this business, ride all the changes, and stay ahead of the curve a little bit? Did that help you do the things you needed to do?

Allen: It helped me a great deal. Much of that was my career before Down East. I went on and worked in New York in several publishing companies. Got my master's degree. Ended up at CBS in their book operation. I did college textbooks across the country and internationally.

That was an exciting business. I traveled a lot. I've been on many campuses. The University of Maine got me to be curious to be able to talk with strangers to appreciate what they were interested in and to become quite friendly with them.

Sally: I think also it taught both of us to be interested in a lot of different things. We both had a liberal arts education which led us to be interested in history, in writing, in science. We had excellent teachers. We loved that. I loved it. I shouldn't speak for Allen, but I know he did.

Also, both of us, even though Allen wasn't brought up in Maine, he became a convert. We both loved Maine. Stories about Maine were very interesting to us as well as to our readers.

Ron: You mentioned your children went here. You've been involved over the years in many different ways with the university.

Why is that? Why do you believe in what UMaine is all about and continue to stay involved, donate money, and also, your time?

Allen: A good part of my career was publishing college textbooks. I was on a number of campuses. Having been so close to the university as we aged, university almost was like checking with my great uncle about some things that I was trying to do with high-tech publishing in New York.

Sally: As students, we had Robert Frost read us poetry to one of our classes. There's that intimacy. The university has many strengths that they didn't have when we were there. Interest in the environment is overwhelming at the University. The Arctic studies are outstanding. Habib's lab is breathtaking. It's so remarkable.

For our purposes and for our times, it was a revelation. We walked in and thought, "Wow. This is the big time. This is where we can learn what we need to know."

Allen: It developed also because we remained attached to people we knew. I worked with, I think, five different presidents over the years. There were various parts of the university that I remained particularly close to. Habib Dagher, for example.

[background music]

Ron: You folks are an inspiration for everything you've done with your magazine and for the university. We thank you so much for sharing some of those stories with us. Continued good luck on everything you do.

Sally: It's been our pleasure.

Allen: It's good to look back on it and think of the number of people who have helped us along the way, supported us, taught us, covered up our mistakes.

[laughter]

Ron: Thanks for joining us. As always, you can find The Maine Question podcast on Apple and Google Podcasts, Spotify, Stitcher, and SoundCloud, as well as UMaine's Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube pages. We're also on Amazon and Audible.

Drop us a note if you have questions or comments at mainequestion@maine.edu. This is Ron Lisnet. We'll catch you next time on The Maine Question.

The University of Maine in Orono is the flagship campus of the University of Maine System, where efforts toward racial equity are ongoing, as is the commitment to facing a

complicated and not always just institutional history. The University recognizes that it is located on Marsh Island in the homeland of the Penobscot nation, where issues of water and its territorial rights, and encroachment upon sacred sites, are ongoing. Penobscot homeland is connected to the other Wabanaki Tribal Nations — the Passamaquoddy, Maliseet, and Micmac — through kinship, alliances, and diplomacy. The university also recognizes that the Penobscot Nation and the other Wabanaki Tribal Nations are distinct, sovereign, legal and political entities with their own powers of self-governance and self-determination.