

LIVING A SIMPLE LIFE

By Linda Schmidt

Eight questions with Stephanie Mills

Bioregionalist, author, and activist Stephanie Mills '69 will present the keynote address at Convocation on October 2 and receive the Distinguished Achievement Award from the Alumnae Association of Mills College on October 3. In advance of her appearances on campus, we talked with her about nature, sustainability, and community.



GARY HOWE

There's been a great upsurge of interest in environmental responsibility lately, but do you think there really is a widespread commitment to changing lifestyles? In other words, is sustainability sustainable?

No, I don't think so. There's green consumerism, and then there are sustainable lifeways, and those are two different things. The kinds of changes that people can make as consumers are not trivial—energy conservation, organic diet, biodegradable cleaners. All those things will temper the destructive practices of industrial civilization; however, we need to drastically reduce our consumption of resources, starting with our consumption of energy. I think sustainable lifestyles are peasant lifestyles. There were relatively more sustainable lifestyles all around planet Earth up until the Industrial Revolution.

If people were to do one thing to lighten their tread on the earth, what would it be?

Well, you've got to start somewhere. I would say, "Ditch the car and quit flying," but the infrastructure that most of us inhabit militates against this practice. I do minimize my automobile use, but I've got to say I was doing better at that last year, before I fell off my bicycle and broke my femur. That's an explanation, not an excuse. But I recycle, I buy in bulk, I have a very energy-conserving—although conventional—house. More and more, I think, all such things are getting to be standard operating procedure.

And although I never want to dismiss the importance of individual actions, some kind of collective action is necessary. The threshold really is communal living and primary productivity. We need to begin to understand what's involved in supplying basic needs—food, energy, and so on—starting

at the household level and then moving outward to larger social groupings: a neighborhood, a city, a region.

What do you mean by "primary productivity"?

I mean direct production of material necessities: food for one, as well as remanufacturing or utilizing existing stocks of goods that are now categorized as waste in order to have households that are more self-reliant. I also mean reclaiming some basic skills of making things, making clothes or shelter.

I hope to see more of what is termed "intermediate technology": energy production, manufacturing, and transportation, built at the human scale. I live in Michigan, where the big centralized auto industry appears about to tank completely, but less than a century ago, there were a few hundred auto manufacturers in the state. So I say: let ten thousand mechanics bloom. Let there be machine shops and bike repair people. Let's encourage that kind of hands-on involvement with simple tools and clever manufacture and judicious use of materials.

You often speak of building community and fostering cooperation. What have been the most surprising experiences as you've become increasingly engaged with your local community?

I live in a semi-rural area, and it's been wonderful

to encounter the readiness to help a neighbor, to pitch in and throw a benefit to pay medical bills, or to help each other build houses. Every summer I see haying parties—people will get a keg of beer and 20 friends, and they'll buck the hay on a hot July afternoon. That's been wonderful to witness.

What's unpleasantly surprising is the extent to which people are willing to buy into "flat earth" propaganda—like climate change deniers. There's scientific consensus around the planet on this, but these hugely amplified, hate-mongering fools are encouraging popular ignorance of the gravity of this situation. I'm kind of shocked by the extent to which this combination of denial and susceptibility to easy answers holds sway. It's everywhere.

Where does that sense of denial come from, is it media or education or politics?

Well, I've got a goodly amount of it myself; if I didn't I'd be living differently! It's a matter of institutional inertia. When I, as an individual, get mobilized to change something and come up against entrenched physical and social systems, it's discouraging. Our American sense of individualism, fostered by so many of our institutions and mythologies, makes it feel strange to undertake a cooperative endeavor to make necessary change. We don't have a lot of skills to do it. So when you pop up and out of denial, the requirement to act puts you into an arena that's incredibly challenging. But what choice do we have?

You've also said that rededication to nature can be a spur to change. How can urban dwellers become closer to nature?

Well, it's really important to meet the neighbors, for starters. Try to form some relationships of mutual aid. If there's a balcony or community garden, plant some things, maybe something you can eat. And see what you can do to discover what remains of wildness in the city. Where are the creeks, where are the wild little patches of so-called undeveloped ground where there might be a fox den, or where are the ledges where the peregrines are nesting? Look around and try to discover what there is of nature wherever you are.

Even city dwellers can learn to perceive themselves as being in bioregions. Maybe it's not too wild a dream to imagine that there could be farm-belts around cities where city dwellers could go to have some direct connection with the people who are helping to feed them or the places supplying the water that flows through their plumbing.

Rediscovering Mills Reunion '09



Go green

Hear Stephanie Mills '69 deliver the **Convocation** address at 10:15 am on Friday, October 2, in the Jeannik Méquet Littlefield Concert Hall. Reunion registration is not required to attend Convocation, but it will allow you to participate in a slew of events on October 2 and 3 highlighting sustainability and the environment. To register for the events listed below, see www.mills.edu/reunion or your Reunion brochure. Call 510.430.2123 for more information.

- **Tours** throughout the weekend of the Botanic Garden and the new "green" building for the Lorry I. Lokey Graduate School of Business.
- 7:00 am Friday: Campus **Bird-watching Walk** with Professor of Biology John Harris.
- 12:00 noon Friday: **Curb Your "Carb-ons" Lunch** showcasing local farmers' bountiful fare.
- 1:30 pm Friday: **Eucalyptus Tree Planting Ceremony** for the first of 90 young *Eucalyptus saligna* to be planted along Kapiolani Road.
- 2:30 pm Friday: Discussion of **campus sustainability** initiatives with Botanic Garden Coordinator Christina McWhorter.
- 9:00 am Saturday: **Landscape Heritage Tour** of campus with Professor of History Bert Gordon.
- 1:30 pm Saturday: **Screening of EARTH DAYS**, a documentary about the origins of the modern environmental movement told through the experiences of nine American activists—including Stephanie Mills, who will sign copies of her memoir, *Whatever Happened to Ecology?*, after the screening.

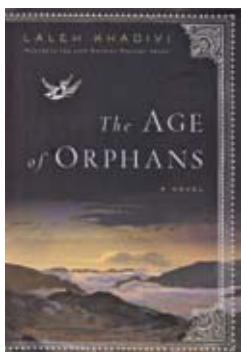
To play devil's advocate, why should I do any of this? I have my food and water, why should I care?

That's a fair question. But you're living a pretty partial life when you're disconnected from your sustenance and the life system that supports you. There's a much fuller, richer, more empowered existence available through paying attention to these realities. And it is a moral issue. We—and I include myself in this—we're robbing the future of a range of possibilities. I think we ought to leave future inhabitants of planet Earth a little bit of biology.

It's a beautiful summer day today and I have to ask: in a life dedicated to simplicity, what do you do for vacation?

You know, I almost never take vacation. But I go for a walk every day, and I love this square mile or so that I inhabit. In the wintertime when it's snowy I cross-country ski; in the springtime there's a walk I take through a lush little woodland. It's teaching me about the wildflowers that grow here and the birds. Today, I'm going to walk over to a neighbor's lake and go for a swim. So it's not like I'm suffering. I have a wonderful mix of work and pleasure and I would wish this kind of existence for anyone and everyone.





The Age of Orphans

Laleh Khadivi, MFA '06
Bloomsbury, 2009

This is not a story of happy endings. In fact, many readers may find the cruelty and brutality too disturbing to withstand as the author depicts murder, rape, ethnic strife, abuse, and forced military conscription. But the novel also offers rewards in Khadivi's pulsing use of language to create a dreamy, poetic landscape of ancient traditions and conflicted souls.

Set in the 1920s, in the tumultuous early days of the nation that would become known as Iran, the book's main character is a Kurdish boy who sees his relatives killed by the troops of Shah Reza Pahlavi; the young orphan travels with the shah's army and rises through the ranks to a position of power and authority. Less than 20 years later, he is promoted to a position overseeing his old Kurdish homelands, where he is torn between his desire to be part of the modern industrialized nation and a sublimated allegiance to his native land, people, and culture.

The author, born in Esfahan, Iran, to a father of Kurdish descent and an Esfahani mother, based much of her research on interviews with older relatives. She was one of 10 "writers of exceptional talent and promise in early career" to receive a Whiting Writers' Award in 2008 and was the 2007–2009 creative writing fellow in fiction at Emory University in Atlanta. A documentary filmmaker, she has investigated topics from the American criminal justice system to life and culture in Brazil.

In discussing her debut novel with the *Kurdish Herald* newspaper, she said she hoped that "readers could read the story, learn about the difficulties faced by Kurds during this period, but ultimately understand that we are all torn between one loyalty and the next and how artificial nationality actually is."

Khadivi speaks at Mills on November 17 as part of the Contemporary Writers Series. See details and other authors in the series in Calendar, page 4.

—Linda Schmidt

Mare's War

Tanita S. Davis, MFA '04
Alfred A. Knopf, 2009

Sisters Tali and Octavia are less than thrilled to be spending their summer vacation on a cross-country road trip with Mare, their sports car-driving, stiletto-wearing, eighty-something grandmother. But Mare's stories about her years as a private in the 6888th African American Battalion of the Women's Army Corps during World War II spur dialogue among the three travelers about the changing dynamics of race, family relationships, romance, and child-rearing. Tali and Octavia soon realize that quirky Mare is a stronger woman than they ever thought possible. With its colorful characters, descriptive details, and focus on a little-known aspect of WWII, *Mare's War* is a valuable and empowering history lesson for young readers.



Rediscovering Mills Reunion '09

Alumnae Authors Invited

Bring your published works to the Reunion 2009 Writers' Salon at 4:30 pm on Saturday, October 3. We welcome submissions in all genres, fiction and non-fiction, ranging from poetry collections to cookbooks, from novels to plays. This event, open to all attendees of Reunion 2009 and Family Weekend, provides the opportunity to visit with fellow alumnae authors and to sell, sign, and/or take orders for your books. If you would like to participate, please contact Anita Aragon Bowers '63 at anitabowers1@comcast.net or 510.339.0804 by September 10.



Approaching Neverland

Peggy Kennedy '76
iUniverse, 2009

This memoir of growing up in a close-knit Irish American family in the Bay Area in the 1960s and '70s initially focuses on the confusion that young Peggy feels as a result of her mother's erratic behavior—a symptom of deeper mental illness. This alone creates an interesting family dynamic, but the Kennedy siblings and other relatives form a cast of characters who are both ordinary and extraordinary: with their quirks, challenges, talents, and love for one another, they lead us on a journey through a time of great social change and evolving attitudes about mental health, sexual orientation, the role of women in marriage and in the workplace, and, especially, the necessity of each person's finding understanding and forgiveness as a step to achieving happiness.



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Over 75 alumnae attended the highly successful launch of a newly formed group of Mills alumnae professionals at B Restaurant and Bar at Yerba Buena Gardens in San Francisco on April 8. The group was initiated by former trustee **Tina Lee '01, MBA '02**, who hopes to form an official Mills College affiliate group to provide continuing education, professional networking, and mentoring opportunities for alumnae.

On April 19, the **Oakland–Berkeley Branch, Mills College Alumnae Association**, welcomed 25 Bay Area alumnae to campus for a dim sum lunch with former Mills English Professor Yiyun Li, who read from and discussed her critically acclaimed first novel, *The Vagrants*.

More than 150 graduating seniors attended the **Pearl M Dinner** and Champagne Reception on April 23, sponsored by the Alumnae Association of Mills College's Alumnae–Student Relations Committee in partnership with Alumnae Relations at Mills College. This year, senior Amanda Page was awarded a Pearl M donated by Kay Westheimer '42. An honorary Pearl M, generously donated by Bronnie Tuchman Blaugrund '64, was presented to Director of Alumnae Relations Laura Gobbi. Alumnae led the students in the traditional lantern procession before enjoying a post-dinner champagne reception at Reinhardt Alumnae House.

Forty **Golden Girls** visited campus for an annual luncheon sponsored by the AAMC and Alumnae Relations on April 27. The program included College updates from President Janet L. Holmgren, followed by a presentation by Campus Architect Karen

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Want to get involved with your local branch? Contact alumnae-relations@mills.edu or 510.430.3363 to find out who's in your area.

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Notes from near and far

Fiene about the newly renovated Jeannik Méquet Littlefield Concert Hall. Guests enjoyed a behind-the-scenes tour of the concert hall after the luncheon.

Twenty alumnae turned out for the kick-off of the AAMC's **Educational Outreach Committee** at Reinhardt Alumnae House on May 2. Nancy Thornborrow, Glenn and Ellen Voyles Chair in Business Education and professor of economics, joined Marianne Sheldon, professor of history, for a discussion about the history of women during the Great Depression. The Educational Outreach Committee, chaired by Michelle Balovich '03, sponsors classes, lectures, and workshops that highlight the expertise of Mills faculty and alumnae. On June 4, committee member Linda Jaquez-Fissori '92 partnered with Kate Dey, director of the Mills Career Services Office, to offer a workshop titled *Change Happens: A Guide for Understanding Career Transitions and Renewing Job Search Skills*. The next event, *The History of Chocolate* with Professor Bert Gordon, is scheduled to take place during Reunion 2009.

Los Angeles Mills College Alumnae enjoyed the company of each other and President Janet L. Holmgren on Saturday, May 9, for tours of the studios of two Mills alumnae artists—Sarah Rossiter, MFA '05, and Carolyn Mason '03, MFA '05—followed by a luncheon at the Tam O'Shanter Inn. The luncheon included the LAMCA annual spring business meeting, where the gavel of branch president was passed from Laurel Burden '68 to Angela Adams DeMoss, MA '99.

Eleven members of the **Orange County Mills College Alumnae** and their families (as well as an incoming student!) enjoyed a tour of Crystal Cove bungalows in early June. After a docent-led tour by former residents, who walked alumnae through four refurbished bungalows while recounting the history of the Cove, guests enjoyed visiting with each other over lunch at the Beachcomber Café.

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1. Alumnae networking event: A few of the first Mills alumnae who joined the April 8 kick-off of the networking group in San Francisco.

2. Pearl M: Amanda Page '09 (far right) with Class President Britt Taylor-Vernon (center) and fellow members of the Senior Class Council.

3. Los Angeles: Julia Almanzan '92, Sarah Rossiter, MFA '05, President Janet L. Holmgren, Bonnie Reuter Leaver '58, and Angela Adams DeMoss, MA '99.

4. Orange County: Incoming student Megan Nicholas-Harper '13 (second from left), Barbara Larkin Stocker '70 (third), Liz Pickering '03 (fifth), and Jana McDonough '78, (sixth), pictured here with friends at Crystal Cove.