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[Home](#) > [Publications & Products](#) > [Currents](#) > [Currents Archive](#) > [2015](#) > [December 2015](#) > [Saving Sweet Briar](#)



Russell Harrison Photography

## Saving Sweet Briar

*The inside story of how a scrappy group of passionate alumnae kept their alma mater's doors open—and what advancement can learn from it*

By *Stacey Sickels Locke*

*Sidebar*

On March 3, 2015, I was in my Los Angeles hotel room on a conference call with my fundraising team back home. Palm trees swayed in the breeze outside my window as my University of Maryland colleagues regaled me with stories about the chilly East Coast weather. Then my cell phone and computer buzzed in alternate, rapid succession. A notice appeared on my laptop:

"Sweet Briar College announces it will close at the end of the academic year."

I stopped talking. "I have to go," I blurted out. "I've just received some terrible news." My co-workers later told me that they thought someone had died.

My deep, abiding love for Sweet Briar College, [my alma mater](#), began in my senior year of high school. After attending four high schools—my family moved midyear, every year, with each job promotion my father earned—what I wanted most in a college, besides an exceptional education, was a place to call home. I longed for community. I hadn't seriously considered a women's college, but the Virginia institution beckoned. When I enrolled, I could feel the closeness and sisterhood that alumnae, known as Vixens, talked about.

Sweet Briar loved me back: I formed lifelong relationships with classmates, faculty, and staff, and developed leadership skills and a penchant for service by volunteering in admissions, student government, the chapel, and student life. The college hired me for my first development job. If asked, I served. If solicited, I gave. I even signed up to be buried on Monument Hill, the campus cemetery where the founder's family is interred.

On the conference call the president convened for alumnae later in the afternoon of March 3, 2015, I was among those demanding answers. The rest of the day unfolded in a blur. But what stood out were the emails and social media messages—personal and professional—filled with passion, determination, and indignation. The movement to save the 114-year-old institution was born.

I joined the effort—and it's made me a better fundraiser.

### No calls for help

The "last" [reunion in May 2015](#) was surreal. Moving boxes lined hallways, offices were empty, even the Chapel sacristy had gaping cupboards and overturned chalices. How did we get here?

### Add a comment

What did you think about this article?

Sweet Briar faced "insurmountable financial challenges," the president and board said when announcing their decision. They cited dwindling enrollment and the need to award progressively more financial aid to an increasingly diverse student body. The college had been tapping the endowment to cover operational shortfalls while also managing debt. The board saw no option but to close.

The news shocked higher education. The 500- to 600-student liberal arts institution is well regarded and one of just two women's colleges with an accredited engineering program. It also had a robust \$85 million endowment. The closing came with no call to alumnae for our help or even a warning. The pages of the alumnae magazine had always contained "good news" stories of students, faculty, and alumnae success.

Sweet Briar's former leadership underestimated its constituents and made several strategic errors. Key positions in admissions and development remained vacant or were held by interim staff, affecting revenue. Leadership did not reveal the financial condition to donors or even the development staff. An independent accounting firm retained by the legal team fighting the closure found no "immediate financial threat."

Documents trustees used for deliberating the college's fate show that they reached flawed conclusions. Leaders said they could not raise funds, citing what they erroneously called a feasibility study, which is normally used to assess fundraising capacity. The survey, however, tested strategic planning priorities commissioned by a prior president for a different purpose. The Donor Insight Survey, which gauged 200 donors' support of various initiatives, including a change in admissions, provided a cautious path forward. A key finding: Alumnae would support any change if the alternative meant no Sweet Briar at all.

Communications and fundraising departments often shield the public from bad news in the belief that donors require positive messages to invest. But crises spur people to action. An independent school I worked for confided in loyal donors and alumnae about its tenuous financial situation and discussed possible solutions. Today the school thrives with increased enrollment, giving, and revenue from alternative sources.

### Filling a need—any need

After the handholding and comforting, Sweet Briar's alumnae and supporters mobilized. Faculty and staff fought their termination with a breach-of-contract complaint—one of three lawsuits that would be filed. Alumnae, faculty, and past board members wrote op-eds dismantling the board's case for closure. Alumnae gave money, held protests, attended legal proceedings, and launched perhaps one of the most successful—and creative—takeover efforts in higher education history.

Within days of the closure, alumnae formed the nonprofit Saving Sweet Briar, which set two goals: 1) to block the closing through the courts and 2) to raise money for both the legal fight and Sweet Briar's funding shortfalls. Board members range from an administrative judge to an educator to an Internet marketer.

Each state had alumnae representatives, as did each class. These leaders, along with committee chairs, such as those leading events and the major gift taskforces, regularly sent legal updates and event reminders to their network of volunteers.

I focused on fundraising. But we had no alumnae records, no research department, no annual giving or major gift data. Instead, we created prospect lists using donor honor rolls from past issues of the alumnae magazine. The daughter of a former catering department employee found a campaign dinner seating chart and entered those names onto a spreadsheet. In the early 1990s, I worked at Sweet Briar as a regional campaign director, launching local campaigns in Boston, New York, Washington, and San Francisco, among other cities. This vast network came in handy.

Picking up the phone was hard at first. *This is a long shot*, niggled in the back of my mind, but I knew I had to try. I made calls, messaged people on Facebook, scoured the Internet for missing alumnae, and pumped friends of friends for contact information. I wouldn't know if people gave unless they told me. We didn't have the infrastructure for gift processing. The firm handling one of the lawsuits accepted pledges and gifts on our behalf, but lacking the types of systems I have in my "day job" was nerve-wracking.

These fundraising calls were among the most difficult I've ever made. We appealed for support not knowing whether we would prevail in court. Some donors politely turned me down but thanked me for what I was doing. But as the weeks passed, fundraising became easier; the calls more inspiring. One donor I'd worked with 20 years earlier made a six-figure commitment.

more inspiring. One donor I'd worked with 20 years earlier made a six-figure commitment, promising to double it when the legal fight was successful. Legal victories turned the tide. Our volunteer fundraiser ranks grew, and the firm Alexander Haas provided pro bono fundraising counsel. Many donors who initially declined to contribute contacted me later to give. One wrote, "I don't want to be on the wrong side of history! I think we are going to WIN!"

From Washington, D.C., to Atlanta to London, Sweet Briar alumnae gathered for events across the globe. No, we didn't have complete mailing lists. Yes, we needed every event to be a fundraiser with an overt "invitation to give" (an approach advancement usually tries to avoid). But despite the many challenges—including a lack of proper response time—events in Atlanta and New York City each raised significant sums.

## How cows led to crowdfunding

Without social media, Sweet Briar may not have survived. It allowed us to mobilize quickly. One of the eight Facebook pages dedicated to the movement turned into Sweet Briar 2.0 ([sbc2point0.org](http://sbc2point0.org)), a hub for strategic planning. A Saving Sweet Briar board member created [savingsweetbriar.com](http://savingsweetbriar.com), a portal to organize and inform supporters with legal updates, news coverage, testimonials, fundraising progress, and links to events. The website was critical for communicating—especially since the college posted closure messages daily. On my blog [beingunlocked.com](http://beingunlocked.com) (previously for travel reviews and recipes), I rallied my community against the closure. I knew we were making progress when newspapers such as *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *The Wall Street Journal* regularly covered our efforts and *The Roanoke Times* quoted my blog.

During the trials, live tweets helped people follow the proceedings. A memorable tweet from a local reporter, quoting Sarah Clement, chair of the Saving Sweet Briar Board, inspired a [crowdfunding campaign](#):

Leader of #SaveSweetBriar group Sarah Clement testifies she'd have reached into her "cow money" had she known of closure risk.  
—Hawes Spencer (@HawesSpencer)

Clement had inherited a farm, cattle included, in Kentucky. Her "cow money" was a special reserve that she would have happily given to save her college. The hashtag #CowMoney started trending and became a microcampaign in which we asked supporters to give their "cow money." Images of the protest banners, events, and funny memes were a daily feature on social media, energizing the Vixens while promoting our cause.

## Know your neighbors

Local leaders may be an institution's best allies. In Sweet Briar's case, Ellen Bowyer, attorney for the County of Amherst, sued to stop the closure, arguing that it would violate the terms of Indiana Fletcher Williams' bequest establishing the college and that solicited gifts could not be used to facilitate the closing. (When I worked for Sweet Briar, I helped raise \$9 million, much of which went into the endowment. Using that money for closure would be a breach of donor trust.)

Amherst Mayor J. Paul Kilgore Jr. described the hardship the closing would cause to the town, which shares infrastructure, including water lines, and a financial relationship with Sweet Briar. He also noted what is true for any college town: Not only is the institution a valuable cultural resource, but students and employees strengthen the local economy.

After the Virginia Supreme Court ruled in the county's favor on June 9, 2015, state Attorney General Mark Herring mediated an agreement. [The former leadership stepped aside](#). To demonstrate viability and good faith, Saving Sweet Briar agreed to make three payments totaling \$12 million to the college. Herring agreed to release \$16 million from the endowment to operate the institution.

When the Virginia Supreme Court announced its decision, my fellow volunteers cheered and wept, and most drove to campus to be together and to ring the bells. The sounds from the bell tower rang around the world as many tuned in live through social media.

## Back to school

Before students returned in the fall, alumnae and supporters from across the country volunteered to paint, mulch, power wash, and [beautify the campus](#). Sweet Briar's new president, Philip Stone, the former head of Virginia's Bridgewater College, recalls stepping out of his office to find a volunteer—a surgeon—working in a garden. Tom Connors, vice president of finance, reports that volunteers donated 4,200 man-hours, saving the college \$60,000 in maintenance costs.

## COSTS.

Sweet Briar opened for classes with about half its previous undergraduates on August 27, 2015—two days after it was slated to close—and with 100 full- and part-time faculty (down from 124 in spring 2015). Many faculty members and coaches who secured other employment were released from their contracts so that they could return. Virginia's Hollins University, Georgia's Agnes Scott College, and other institutions that admitted displaced Sweet Briar students released them back to the college.

Hard decisions lay ahead for Stone and the new, more transparent Sweet Briar Board of Trustees: The curriculum will likely change to match student interests, employer demand, and funding. An official major gift campaign will undoubtedly be launched in the coming year. Enrollment will need to significantly increase. Alternative revenue sources will be explored to lessen the pressure on admissions and development.

In just six months, the Vixens raised \$21 million in gifts and pledges. I made 188 phone, email, and in-person contacts. As the tide from this high level of engagement began to ebb, I was feeling a bit bereft—until I returned to campus for Founders' Day on September 25. Founders' Day is like homecoming, but this year it was a pilgrimage, reunion, and celebration rolled into one. As my husband and I drove up the long driveway, a smiling security guard greeted us. "Thanks for saving my job," he said.

We celebrated with receptions and concerts, and attended training sessions on how to bolster admissions, fundraising, and regional events. Our marching orders include attending college fairs, visiting high schools, hosting events, funding student activities, mentoring students, supporting camps and open houses for middle and high school girls, and more.

Mary Pope Hutson, chair of the Major Gift Task Force, gave each member a copy of a children's book inspired by our efforts, *How the Vixens Saved the School*. Inside, Hutson, recently appointed vice president for alumnae relations and development, had written, "Thank you for being a heroine to all future generations of our alma mater!" That book sits in my office alongside some of my most important career mementos.

The [march to Monument Hill](#) is the heart of Founders' Day weekend. Led by a bagpiper, students walk with their sister classes, accompanied by board members and faculty. Daisies and other [flowers are laid](#) on the final resting places of the founding family. The line of marchers stretched from the heart of campus to Monument Hill.

WE KEPT THE FAITH  
COLLEGE SAVED  
VISION ENDURES  
ROSES STILL BLOOM  
JULY 2, 2015

reads [a plaque the college's new leaders unveiled](#).

## The Legal Landscape

A timeline of the court battle over Sweet Briar's future

### March 3

Sweet Briar College announces its closure on Facebook and in emails to constituents. Alumnae organize through social media an effort to save the college.

### March 5

Supporters collectively pledge \$1 million to fight the closure through [SavingSweetBriar.com](#).

### March 30

Amherst County, Virginia, Attorney Ellen Bowyer seeks an injunction to keep the college open. She argues that donor funds are being improperly used to finance closure expenses and that closing is a violation of the trust that formed the college.

### April 15

Bedford County Circuit Court Judge James W. Updike Jr. rules that the SBC board is a corporation and not subject to donor protection laws or oversight.

### April 24

More than 50 faculty members file a \$40 million breach of contract lawsuit; later, a group of students and their parents file a third lawsuit.

### April 29

County Attorney Bowyer appeals Updike's April 15 ruling to the Virginia Supreme Court.

### June 9

The Virginia Supreme Court rules that Sweet Briar is both a trust and a corporation and remands the case back to Judge Updike's court.

### June 22

Updike approves a settlement brokered by Virginia's attorney general to keep the college open. All litigation is dismissed.

### July 2

The keys to the college are turned over to new leadership.

### August 27

The fall term begins.

## Advancement Lessons

1. Don't wait for a crisis to remind alumni how much their institution means.
2. Be honest. Alert your constituents to problems—and how they can help solve them. Ask them: "What would a world be like without [name of institution]?"
3. You don't need perfect spreadsheets, amazing databases, super software, or approved scripts to be a successful fundraiser. You need passion, honesty, and tenacity.
4. Don't constrain your supporters. Tap into their high level of energy and engagement.
5. Include friends, family, and neighbors in your engagement efforts.
6. Alumni may not attend a run-of-the-mill event, but they will show up for a cause they believe in. Provide opportunities to gather, create a sense of urgency, and use events to update constituents on critical issues.
7. Get to know elected officials and community members as well as faculty and staff. Invite the community to visit and interact with your students. Strong relationships will mitigate divisive "town versus gown" disputes.
8. Advancement staff, institutional leaders, and board members should regularly consult The Donor Bill of Rights and the Statement of Ethics at [bit.ly/CASE\\_principles](http://bit.ly/CASE_principles).

## About the Author

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## Comments

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