

SAINT MARY'S SCHOOL

Alumnae Profile

Merritt Atkins '99

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Confidence. Commitment. Connection. Merritt Atkins '99 lives and breathes Saint Mary's, as a former student, an alumnae leader, and an ambassador in the community. For her, the institution is more than where she went to high school. It's a place where she felt supported and nurtured, was challenged, and created memories with lifelong friends. It's also where her heart and sense of home is.

Where I Was Meant to Be

"I was born in Raleigh, but we relocated to Hickory when I was a toddler," she explains. "In my junior year of high school, my dad, Ken, was offered the chance to become the Executive Director for Wake County Economic Development, a program of the Greater Raleigh Chamber of Commerce. So, we came back."

High school can be a difficult journey for any teen. Add in a new city and having to leave behind friends and your community, and it can be terrifying. However, Merritt wasn't your average 90s girl; she was adventurous, creative, and entrepreneurial. And, Saint Mary's was the perfect fit.

Merritt's parents settled in Cary when they relocated back to the area, and the family visited several potential schools for Merritt and her brother.

"Cyrus enrolled at Cary Academy and he became part of their first ninth-grade class," Merritt remembers. "I visited a lot of schools – Ravenscroft, Hale (now Saint David's), Cary Academy. But, my mom who was an educator knew about Saint Mary's, so we came for a tour and the day was perfect – blue sky and sunshine."

Warm air, a grove of oak trees, the friendly environment, small class sizes, and personalized admissions experience sealed the deal. "This was where I was meant to be."

It was midway through her first semester during her junior year, and admissions worked with the family to fast-track her application. After her interview, her mom visited with the Registrar, financial aid, and advising departments. Merritt was enrolled that day.

"My transition went very well," she says. "My biggest challenge was having to drive a Volkswagen stick shift on a four-lane highway (big city roads) every day when I followed my dad into Raleigh!"

Merritt quickly learned to navigate traffic and easily engaged in the life of her new school. She made new friends her first two weeks, joined theatre and Chorale and enjoyed her classes.

"I was not a wallflower and loved making new friends," she explains. "And, the Saint Mary's small class size and activities they offered made it easy."

Home is Where the Heart Is

As a student, Merritt spent a lot of time in Bratton Hall and Pittman Auditorium. She lived in Penick her senior year. She and a classmate were selected to sing "O' Holy Night" as a duet during Lighting O' the Grove.

"One of the best memories was my time as a Marshal. We presided over the final junior college graduation ceremony, and that was incredibly special."

Academically, Merritt also quickly transitioned. She and her advisor realized that she was a little behind in math and foreign language credits. So, they made plans for Merritt to take classes during the summer at NC State University to help catch her up before senior year. She also surprised her parents with her entrepreneurial spirit: she came home at the end of her junior year and told them she was going to be a boarding student.

"My mom and dad were – *not surprisingly* – a little shocked. Especially with the additional financial commitment, and I'm sure they wondered what they'd do," she says.



True to form, Merritt had already applied for and was approved to become a Prefect, and she'd received a scholarship to underwrite her boarding fees. That way, the family could continue to pay a day student rate, and Merritt would get the boarding experience she craved.

Because Merritt lived at Saint Mary's her senior year, her mother began spending more time on campus. After volunteering and helping with various projects, President Clauston Jenkins asked Glad Atkins if she would consider taking a full-time position on campus. She agreed and joined the faculty at the end of Merritt's senior year.

"Two years later, she and my dad moved onto campus to live in the Bishop's House!" she says. "They lived there for six years. When I would come home from college, I came home to Saint Mary's."

Merritt believes Saint Mary's was a life-changing opportunity that gave her a great deal in a compact timeframe, ensuring she had no problems transitioning to college life.

"I am grateful the school supported my confidence and independence and helped shape who I am today," she explains.

Merritt applied for early admission at NC State University and was accepted. There, she completed a bachelor's in business management. After graduating, she went to work at Mulkey Engineers & Consultants in a marketing and business development role. Her next position was for WakeMed in government affairs. Additional experience includes business development director for York, Simpson & Underwood Realty and with Nexsen Pruet (a regional commercial law firm with more than 190 attorneys in 8 offices throughout North and South Carolina) for six years in a business development role.

But, it was when she met the Holt Brothers – *two retired NFL players who moved back to Raleigh to start their business* – that she had the opportunity to work for a firm that is different. The company includes a commercial construction business and a non-profit foundation that supports children who have a parent with cancer. With a passion for community, this was a perfect fit for Merritt.

"Torry and Terrence created a diverse, entrepreneurial company that was easy to be inspired by," she shares. "Diversity enriches life experiences and that is very important to me. As a student, I was exposed to differences in various ways through opportunities and activities. Saint Mary's helps girls navigate those experiences with confidence, and I am so glad to have stayed engaged with my school and to now work in a place that makes community and connection a priority."

Saint Mary's for Life

During her time as a student and over the years, as she returned home during college breaks, Merritt connected with alumnae leaders, students, faculty and staff. When Leslie Allred Yates '96HS '98C and Margaret McGlohon '81C reached out to ask her to help them start a Young Alumnae Advisory Board, she jumped at the chance.

"Fast forward, and I've spent the past six years serving on the Alumnae Council, and the last two as Co-President with Diane Gupton Becton '77HS. I've essentially never left!"

Merritt enjoys her alumnae leadership position because she's met so many Saint Mary's women and has been given the opportunity to "dig in and truly understand the needs and challenges" of their alma mater. "To be able to share this information with other women who want our school to be here for the next 177 years is imperative. We want to secure our future, not just for us but for generations of young women, and I'm privileged to be doing this."

She's proud of the work she and Diane have done in building Alumnae Council meeting agendas that create opportunities for Council members to be more deeply engaged and to further support the vision, mission, and needs Saint Mary's has today. She enjoys getting to know today's students and watching their success. She also volunteers at events like the Junior Ring Banquet and the 'Welcome to the Alumnae Association' senior dinner and is on the school's Board of Visitors. Most recently, she accepted a role on the public committee of the upcoming *Saint Mary's Forever* capital campaign.

"Saint Mary's holds a piece of my heart," she explains. "If we don't steward our school today in new and different ways, it won't be here tomorrow."

Merritt has some advice for today's girls and young alumnae who are new in their careers. "Nurture and build your relationships. Develop a network of women and men who will help you get what you need to be successful. Ask for what you want. And, don't forget to give back to the place that's given you so much. We owe it to our school and the women who will follow in our footsteps."

Merritt certainly embodies the spirit of Saint Mary's: educated women make a difference.

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