

Ardith's interview

1. Can you state your name for the record? **Ardith Leigh Morrison Morgan**
2. When were you born?
3. Where were you born? Reno, Nevada. Where did you grow up? What other places have you lived? Why did you choose Ole Miss? **Both my grandmother and my mother were born there, and both my grandmother and my mother were Tri Deltas at the University of Nevada. But my mom married my dad, we moved around a little bit, and we ended up outside of New Orleans. And so, my senior year of high school, I did not want to go to LSU like everybody else, so I looked elsewhere and ended up at Ole Miss! It was totally random, but I visited quite a few college campuses and it [Ole Miss] just felt like home from the moment I got there - it felt right.**
8. What did you know about Greek life before coming to Ole Miss? **Well, like I said, my mother and my grandmother were both Tri Deltas, and my mother had been very involved throughout my upbringing as an alum, so I just kind of learned by her example. And I knew about the philanthropy aspect of it, and the sisterhood aspect, and so I kind of just grew up knowing that that was the path I was going to follow. So when I went through rush back '84, I was from out of state, and I was one of 200 Tri Delt legacies, and so I was cut pretty early on because they knew they weren't going to give me a bid. So I was kind of crushed for about five minutes, and then I moved on because I had other houses, and I was having a good time, and I knew I would end up in the right place.**
9. When did you pledge? **August of 1984; initiated February 1985**
10. What was your recruitment experience like? **As I mentioned, I was from out of state. I had no ties to Ole Miss. I had no ties to anyone in any sorority, so I was a little bit of a fish out of water, but I know a lot of people are like that going through rush - especially today. So I just kept an open mind - of course I had attachments to Delta Delta Delta because my mother and grandmother were in that sorority, but I just had a good time with it; I tried to meet a lot of people, and I kind of let the process do its thing. So, at the end I wound up with three choices, and I put Theta first, and was thrilled when I got my bid!**
11. How would you describe Greek life on the Ole Miss campus during your time there? **It was fun! There was always something going on, and it wasn't just parties - it was a lot of parties, I will not dispute that, and I enjoyed going to parties - but it was also like everyone always had a philanthropy event going on, some kind of little fundraiser or charitable event going on. So, I remember that the most about Greek life - is that there was, you know, even if you weren't into the party scene and going to a frat house and listening to bands, there were always other things that the Greeks were doing to raise money for a good cause, or to get together - or both, and so I met so many people and it made Ole Miss more of a home for me while I was there, because I knew so many people through all these different events and organizations.**
12. Was there a tier system like there is today? **I'd say there probably was, but it wasn't as pronounced as it is today. Because today, you've got social media and you have those awful websites like Greek Rank - we didn't have all that back then, we just had word of mouth, but it's probably always been there. Unless you go to a small college with three sororities, even then people are gonna say, "oh, this one's the best. This one's the worst. They're right in the middle." But, I personally feel like to do that is a disservice to every group on campus because, especially at Ole Miss where the chapters are so large, within each chapter you have a diverse**

group. You have your girls who study all the time, your girls who party all the time, you have your shy girls, your outgoing girls, you have your girls who are engineering students, you have your girls who prefer the arts. You know? Every single group has diversity. And so I'm not quite sure how the labeling has become so profound over the years, but I think part of it - I'm gonna go out on a limb here and say a lot of it stems from the "old guard" in Mississippi - the people who tell their girls when they go through rush, "you don't wanna be in this group," or "you don't wanna be in that group," because girls come to Ole Miss with a preconceived notion, and so they kind of stick their noses up in the air at some of these other groups, and then if they don't get in one of those top tiers, they're devastated. And then mama has to eat crow, too. And I've heard of these instances, so it's not something I'm pulling out of the air, it's not a guess - I know it happens. It's not just the girls, either - it happens to boys too. I know someone whose son did not have a good fraternity rush, and they pulled him out of school and brought him back home. Which is disappointing to me, because people's priorities are wrong if that's why they're going to school. I think that Greek life should enhance your education, not be the center of your education.

13. What is the mission of theta?

14. Why did you choose to join? I just had the best experience with Kappa Alpha Theta going through the recruitment process, because everybody I met during each round was so fresh and so real and so down to earth and so fun - just, you know, lighthearted - and I met girls of all different academic backgrounds and I just felt like - this is where I wanna be. These girls are great. I felt like in some of the houses, honestly the ones that dropped me, I felt like they were very superficial - they asked me questions like what my father did, if my pearls were real, where I bought my clothes - and it just kind of turned me off. And I developed friendships with girls in some of those other organizations, and they're lovely girls individually. But back at the Theta house, I just felt like they were so genuine. And there were a lot of out-of-state girls, and so I felt at home because of the geographical diversity. And then while I was in school, we weren't quite as much of a suitcase group - we didn't head home every weekend, because most of us lived too far away. So I always had friends on the weekends, whereas a lot of other groups were packing up and heading back to Jackson or the Delta or wherever. So that was good for me.

15. What does theta mean to you?

16. Can you tell us about your philanthropy? When I pledged, our philanthropy was actually the Institute for Logopedics. It wasn't until I think my senior year that the philanthropy changed to CASA. I couldn't tell you anything about it other than we raised money for it - we weren't very hands-on with it. There wasn't any place nearby that we could do things for kids or whatever, so I don't really remember much about it.

17. Can you tell us about other events, programs, or activities you sponsored or hosted for those individuals that are learning about Theta for the first time? On Homecoming weekend we'd have a brunch, and that was always fun to see the alumni come through, and parents. While I was there we started Dad's weekend which was kind of the precursor to parent's weekend, and of course, moms would come too. We just called it Dad's weekend and we had fun activities at the house. It started out as a social thing, and then it became parent's weekend. They added in an option and it turned into, long after I was there, it turned into a big event where parents through this option would donate money something big for the house. One year

they got new flooring, one year they got the baby grand piano, just different things like that to help the house out. Because we were such a young chapter, our alumni base was very young and we didn't have very deep pockets. You know, we couldn't just tell alumni "we need this" and it would appear. Our alumni were just starting their careers and getting their lives launched.

When were you founded on Ole Miss's campus?

1979 because this year is our 40th anniversary.

Did you live in the house?

I did, I lived there probably longer than anyone else did.

What was your experience like, tell us?

I loved it. It was the best. I just so enjoyed having sisters around me all the time. I loved eating breakfast in my pajamas. The cooks were amazing. We had the best cheese grits on campus. Really, our cooks were amazing, we had good food. It was just fun and if I was in a great mood, I had someone to share it with and if I was upset about something there was always a shoulder to cry on. If I needed help studying, there was always someone around. There was a test file in the house that was always accessible so you could look at old tests to study. I think that's why so many of my memories blur together because I moved in January of '86 and I lived in the house until graduated in May of '88.

So you had plenty of time to bond with everyone and enjoy that experience in the house?

I did! I remember one year in 1987 we were getting ready for derby days (the sigma chi derby days"

What is that? Tell me about it for people who don't know.

Okay that was Sigma Chi used to have a big fundraiser for their philanthropy and it was called Derby Days and every sorority would compete. As much fun as it was, I was kind of opposed to it because it was demeaning to women. It started out with each sorority doing a dance, like the whole sorority did a dance, for this panel of Sigma Chi judges. And there was a queen, i guess before the dance we brought out our queen nominee and then they had games. I remember the games were things were you got wet and or muddy. They had tug of war and they had instead of musical chairs they had musical wash buckets that were filled with water. I remember when that was done, I think I won it one year, but i remember I had bruises all over the back of my legs from slopping up and down on that wet bucket. Um, I'm trying to remember what else they had all kinds of games throughout the day. It was fun but like i said at the same time kind of demeaning. But they raised a lot of money and like i said it was fun. In the spring of '88 i think it was, no it was the spring of '87 um our theme was walk like an Egyptian. We had the best dance, by far, and we didn't even place. So, we were just like whatever. So, our dance was just so cool, and everybody loved it and it was so cool and it was so different from everyone else's. Each sorority was assigned coaches that were members of Sigma Chi fraternity and even they were like you guys got robbed. So, anyway there were other things i remember the Pikes had Paddy Murphy or maybe it was SAE i don't remember now. But every one had their own little thing like i remember ATO had Gatorbash and i went to that a couple of years and it was a fun party. These parties would be like all weekend long. You would go on friday night and then there would be the day party all day long and then there would be a night party and by Sunday you are absolutely exhausted. I remember one thing the Theta's used to do is we used to have kite flight in the spring and we would go out to sardis and fly kites and it was really nice. Some

people would take dates and we would fly kites and have a picnic out there. It was a nice event and our big sis/lil sis party or i guess you would call it the reveal or they call it now big/ lil but we called it big sis/lil sis. So, when we pledged we would have a different Kite Sis every week for i guess about 5 weeks so that you could get to know different members in the chapter really well and then after that we would all go out to sardis. The actives would go first and the actives would go first with a spool of yarn that was attached to like poster board that was all decorated that had the pledges name on it so they would tack the kite to a tree out at Sardis. There was this one areas that had a lot of trees and then they would take the yarn and they just zig-zag it all around the trees. So when the pledges drove up they had to find their name so on their kite and they would spend all this time spooling around their yarn and going under yarn over it and around trees until they got to their big kite that said, "Congratulations Love you, Ardith!" or you know whoever your big sis was and then they would get a small gift. It was all about the sisterhood it wasn't all about the gifts. When i say a small gift i mean it was just a momento, because it wasn't about that. Now i feel like everything is all about that and everything has gotten very superficial with all the big gifts and spending lots of money. It didn't used to be like that. It truly used to be all about the sisterhood . I wish that today's sorority girls at Ole Miss could experience it the way we did 35 years ago. I knew everybody in the chapter back then when we were smaller. They got rid of big sis/lil sis because our headquarters determined that was hazing.

That shocks me. I have never heard anything like that and usually I am up to date on things like that as faculty.

Right well Kappa Alpha Theta nationally takes a very strong stance against hazing or bullying or any kind of behavior that would make somebody feel belittled. Probably what happened was that somebody complained. That is usually what happens. Probably about 20 to 23 years ago they put an end to that. Yeah it was a good time we used to have a "Mi Casa, Su Casa" dinner on a Thursday night and everyone would sell tickets for five dollars. People would come eat at the house and we would serve Mexican food. We had the dining room all decorated and that was lots of fun. You know, it wasn't just about the swaps and the formals and the drinking and the parties. There were a lot of other things that we did that were fun.

So how have you remained active or involved over the years? Or have you been able to?

Oh yes, I have probably been the most involved over the years more than anyone else. Right after I graduated, I became an advisor so I advised over the rush recommendations chairman and a couple of other offices but that is the one I remember. That is the one that I had done in school so I was good at it and familiar with it. It required me to spend a lot of time down there for recruitment and during recruitment I went down and helped. Then I became the advisor board chairman and I did that for a couple of years or so. I got married during that time. I lived in Memphis during that time. My husband got transferred so in 1994 I moved to North Carolina and I did nothing in North Carolina because there were no Thetas. It is an army town. I loved North Carolina but for me North Carolina was the worst place to live because I wasn't from there and I

wasn't military. So I had nothing except my job, and my job was that I worked with military wives. Nobody needed friends because they all had their military people and so that was kind of hard. Then we moved to Little Rock and I right away connected with Thetas who lived in the area and I started the alumni chapter there. Then we moved to Denver where they already had a very solid alumni chapter with like 500 members. It was a lot of fun there. I immediately got involved there; I actually had friends out there who were involved and got me more involved. I did that for a couple of years and then we got transferred to Michigan and in Michigan I connected with some women who got together once a month and went out to dinner. That was fun. It was a good experience because I was the only one from the South. I think it was an education for both of us. They had gone to Pennsylvania and Michigan and Michigan State, different schools up north that I really was not familiar with. It broadens your horizons as to how big your organization really is when you get to meet people from all over like that. And then we were only in Michigan for a year before we came back to the Memphis Area. When we came back I joined the housing corporation board for the Thetas there at Ole Miss. After 2 ½ years I became the President until February 2018. I stepped down so I could pursue other volunteer activities. In hindsight, I wish I had not stepped down. I don't know that it would have changed the outcome, but I might have been in a position to have been of more help and perhaps be a little more help.

Were you blindsided like the other women?

I was. I was completely blindsided and some of the characteristics that our national officer portrayed our chapter as having, I didn't think were accurate. I didn't have the facts because I hadn't been on the board for 8 or 10 months. I didn't have the facts in front of me to dispute what they were saying. It was shocking and to have someone at the highest level of your sorority sit there and tell you that they are closing our chapter because the girls are unpopular is just unbelievable. I will just never forget that meeting. I was very disappointed in our leadership at that point.

I can imagine and I didn't realize how much of an active role of leadership you were previously and all over the country with the organization. I had no idea, now I understand why your name was forwarded to me. Are there any other experiences or things you want to share about Theta for incoming freshman to learn about? I make my students read about everything we archive so this is for students 5 or 10 years down the road that may have not known about this.

Yes, Well I am very active now in the Memphis alumni chapter. I am the Vice President of the alumni chapter here and there is also a new alumni chapter, I think that was part of our demise as well that there wasn't an active alumni chapter in Oxford. I think that if there was an active group it would have helped the chapter over the years and given them the boost they needed. I think that I and I'm not alone, we are examples of our motto in Theta and that is that "Theta is for a lifetime." It can be as much or as little as you want it to be kind of like your undergraduate years. As an alum unless you live in some place like Fayetteville, North Carolina, but there is so many opportunities but even if you do live in some place like Fayetteville, North Carolina where there is not a presence of your organization, with the internet now or social media there are

ways to get involved. I feel like I could have risen higher in the organization, I just chose not to. I like being close to home base and in the field, but there are so many opportunities. One thing I can say about Kappa Alpha Theta is that they, if you are open to it and you want to, they are very good at developing leaders. There are always leadership opportunities and those opportunities open doors and help you to network. I think it is life changing, you know? It has been wonderful for me, I have embraced it. This whole situation with closing the chapter; I know I have friends that are angry and don't want anything to do with Kappa Alpha Theta right now and that kind hurts me too because we still have each other. We are not the problem, we are not the ones to be mad at, we shouldn't be upset with each other and keeping to ourselves. We should be keeping company amongst each other. We should be supporting each other and supporting these members that are still in the chapter, well not still in the chapter, but are still at Ole Miss who are still active members and can't join another organization. I know that most of the new members that we pledged this past fall, most of them chose not to be initiated and many of those women were able to become new members in other sororities. We were happy for them, but for the other members that are left, we need to support them. That is why I have gotten involved with the new Oxford Theta Alumni chapter so I can help with that support. Our Memphis Alumni Chapter is helping out with as much as we can, we are helping in little ways to support those women as well. It's a huge organization and there is so much out there, as hurt and as angry as we are we have to remember those people that caused us to feel that way are a very very small portion of that picture. That's what keeps me going.

Absolutely. I am excited to hear there is a Oxford Alumni Chapter.

Yes, we are brand new.

Well if there isn't anything else you want to add that's all of my questions for you.

I think that's it. I just hope that since this has happened, I have heard a lot of people say, "wow this is horrible. The Thetas contributed a lot on campus. They are good girls" I have seen so many of them, these girls, we have some outstanding women who are still on campus as members of Kappa Alpha Theta and it makes me really sad that their reputation had become what it was. I think it goes back to what I said earlier about the old guard in Mississippi. I'm just going to pin that blame on them for now. I think some of the blame also goes to us as well, I think in addressing some problems we should have thought outside the box more and not just followed the same old protocol that head quarters was handing down. Maybe the communication was not being made, I know that alumni in general were not being made aware of any problems and had they known I think they would have risen to the occasion. They have certainly risen to the occasion now. There is a reunion coming up in two weeks that some alumni have organized. Partly to support the members that are still there but also to remember the good times and have one last 'hoorah' before we don't own that house anymore. Well we will own the house but before it isn't ours to play in anymore. Anyway, I just hope that our legacy is not one of a yuck factor, but that we were fresh active young women who did a lot for Ole Miss.

Absolutely. If you could hear what the women have to say about CASA it was so impressive. I didn't realize that you raised that you raised the most money out of all the Greeks on campus.

Yeah, and i never had anything to do with all of that. We raised money on a very very small scale here in memphis but what they did with Theta encore was unbelievable.