

### **Class of 1980 Reunion Reflection**

On March 16, 1979 the Movie "The China Syndrome" was released. It is a thriller about a television reporter, Jane Fonda, and her cameraman, Michael Douglas, who discover safety cover-ups at a nuclear power plant. In one scene, the physicist, Dr. Elliott Lowell, played by Donald Hutton, says that the China syndrome would render "an area the size of Pennsylvania" permanently uninhabitable. Back in Lancaster PA, F&M's class of 1980 was busy preparing for spring break. The Dips had taken third place in Division 3 men's basketball semi finals. It was a busy time. Twelve days later, on March 28, back a few days from vacation; we were getting ready for exams and papers. Little did anyone know that at 4am life would begin to imitate art. Forty miles away, in Middletown PA, Three Mile Island, Reactor 2 was operating at 97% capacity when a minor malfunction caused the temperature to rise. This caused the reactor to shut down. A relief valve failed to close and a meltdown began. The operators were unable to respond properly to the unplanned shutdown and there was inadequate emergency response. 1 We did not know it then but the worst nuclear accident to date in history was in progress.

During the day on Wednesday, we heard about a nuclear reactor accident near Harrisburg. For many, the extent of our exposure to Three Mile Island was that it was something we saw while skiing at Roundtop. It was a busy week at school. Exams were scheduled the following week, papers were due and it was hell week for many fraternities. Three Mile Island was front-page news in all the national and international media. The word was that TMI was not a danger to us in Lancaster. The next day, Governor Thornburgh began recommending preschool children and pregnant women living within 5 miles of TMI consider evacuating the area. That was Thursday. Communications problems led to conflicting information available to the public,

contributing to the public's fears. 1 By Friday afternoon the rumors of a "radiation vacation" became a reality. School officials, guided by President Carter and Governor Thornburgh saying "its better to err on the side of caution" decided to cancel classes at least until Tuesday. By 4 pm Friday afternoon, campus looked like a ghost town. The weather helped too. It was a very gray day. The streets around campus were deserted, except for some seniors who saw humor in the situation and donned has mat suits and gas masks. Our emotions ran the gamut from surprised, to scared to confused to elated. Many of us headed home, armed with important possessions like teddy bears, cameras, and photos in case we could not return to campus at all. And we brought books too, just in case there really were going to be exams the following week! Another radiation vacation destination was "our nations capital". Two F&M students spending spring semester in DC had an unexpected party with friends from campus who decided to descend upon them. But they were very careful not to leave their dorm room too often as DC was not very far and no one knew how dangerous this really was or was not. And then there were the die hards. The people who decided that the fraternity party they planned for Friday night was a go. After all, hundreds of pounds of sand were already in the basement. And party they did-with anyone and everyone who decided to stay in Lancaster!

By the following week, we were back at school figuring out what exams and papers were due. Life had returned to its new normal. The semester would not be extended. The only visible memory of TMI were those bright yellow shirts with "hell no, we won't glow, on the front and radiation Vacation 1979 on the back.