

## Editorial: Doing Something

By John Williams

Ladies and gentlemen, this issue of the *Recorder* proudly presents some Alpha Chi alumni worth meeting: Colleen Rowley, Patrick Woody, Christina Parker, Erin Boyd, and David Clifford. We include them in these pages to honor their significant contributions to the public good. Their accomplishments focus the spotlight on an important contemporary issue: the health of civic virtue in America.

In this country we celebrate the heroic individual against the group. Our history begins with giants of courage and resolve settling a wilderness. Our literary canon mythologizes individuality in “isolatos” like Natty Bumppo, Huck Finn, and Jay Gatsby while it satirizes conformists like Babbit.

The dream of creating, or recreating, the self in opposition to society is still an attractive part of our cultural heritage. This worship of individuality, however, conflicts with another important national impulse: the formation of community. The country’s founders included close-knit religious groups who saw the future in terms of social solidarity. In the two hundred years since the Continental Congress, America has been a unique test case for the coexistence of the lone hand and the helping hand. In 1998, sociologist Robert Putnam entered the fray with a bestselling book, *Bowling Alone: the Collapse and Revival of American Community*, arguing that the country had wandered too far into individuality.

The book cites reams of statistics to demonstrate that at the end of the 20th century, Americans participated less in politics, belonged to fewer organizations, signed fewer petitions, and knew or cared less about their neighbors. In almost every measurable category, we did not get together in meaningful ways as much as we used to. The changes documented by Putnam damage what he calls “social capital,” the “collective value of all social networks . . . and the inclinations that arise from these networks to do things for each other.” From formal entities such as political parties to informal gatherings like Friday night card games, groups foster “reciprocity,” the willingness to exchange help for mutual benefit.

While America seems replete with groups of all kinds, Putnam portrays a country where we congregate as spectators or consumers but share few civic concerns. Public space is reserved mostly for entertainment, not serious discussion. As a result, culture risks breeding loners like Sy Parrish in the film *One-Hour Photo*. Pleasant and functional on the outside, he has no meaningful tie to his community. He depends on fantasy connections to others for psychic survival. And he is dangerous.

Putnam’s remedy for this collective illness, a strong dose of social capital, does not mean some new version of socialism, but the idea does have political implications. The late social historian Christopher Lasch has argued that democracy is the union of individualism and local collective action. His description of the polis echoes Putnam’s prescription for solidarity: “Democracy works best when men and women do things for themselves, with the help of friends and neighbors . . . .”

In fact, for Lasch, the splintering of postmodern culture weakens individuals and thereby fosters a therapeutic society in which supportive roles designed for family and neighbors are usurped by big government or vast ranks of professionals. These new elites, as Lasch calls them, are more dangerous than misfits like Sy Parrish. Their wealth and expertise insulate them from the surrounding community, and their goals center on global capitalism rather than on local needs.

In a series of books, Lasch tells the story of American character dying in the seductive embrace of materialism and transience. Too gloomy to be entirely true, his analysis poses compelling questions about our civic life. Democracy, he insists, should be judged not only by the goods but also by the character it produces. Before his death in 1994, he wondered whether it will survive—or whether it even deserves to.

Rejecting such dark assessments, Robert Putnam has returned with a new book that takes a more optimistic view of the nation’s individual and social character. *Better Together: Restoring American*

Community (2003) is the result of field research into twelve innovative organizations throughout the country. He concludes that as it did at the beginning of the 20th century, America is learning how to repair the latest gashes in its social fabric. Now as then, solutions to local and national problems are emerging from the formation of all sorts of civic-minded groups.

This good news is supported by the record of our honored and honorable alumni. They have helped make Alpha Chi eligible to join Putnam's list of exemplary organizations.

First, David Clifford, a neuropharmacologist and AIDS researcher, contradicts Lasch's portrait of the "elites" as a self-absorbed, career-driven class, inimical to traditional community. Instead, Clifford epitomizes Putnam's creator of social capital. He has used his expertise and clout to organize an international coalition of doctors who join forces to help the global community. At the national level, Coleen Rowley, the most famous of these alumni, stood up to the FBI in the best tradition of civic-mindedness—to preserve the integrity of an institution she loved. Finally, in tiny Boiling Springs, North Carolina, the students of Gardner-Webb's chapter demonstrate Putnam's point that social capital is more than bonding. It depends—and insists on—standards of behavior that promote the general welfare. When the standards of Gardner-Webb's academic community were threatened, Alpha Chi used the school's social networks to inform, to protest, and ultimately to effect change.

The following articles make clear that exercise of civic virtue is not without cost. As Putnam puts it, social capital is not an escape from conflict but a way of "making conflict productive." The struggle is worth it. Besides, what choice does America have? Without the atmosphere of trust that gets things done, our history has no barnraisings, no Kiwanis clubs, no holiday food drives, and no resilience in the face of 9/11.

America has been blessed in this regard. For every romantic rebel who sees community as conformity and must stay aloof or flee, we have had many "conformists" who see community as opportunity—and must stay. Interestingly, the name of one of Putnam's model organizations is also the motto of Alpha Chi's 2003 Distinguished Alumnus, David Clifford. When faced with the overwhelming crisis of AIDS, he could muster one vague but compelling imperative: "Do Something." Among other things, this coincidence reminds us that social capital begins with painfully simple individual decisions.

Let us therefore applaud individuality and civic virtue, the yin and yang of American life, and these alumni, who remind us of how the two should work in harmony to make things better.