

Brown receives first Commerce and Industry Award given by RHS

By Mary Margaret van Diest
marymargaret@rustonleader.com

Ruston High School Alumna Sarah Watt Brown came from California recently to accept the first RHS Distinguished Alumni Award given in the category of Commerce and Industry.

The acceptance speech she gave at the RHS Alumni Association Awards Luncheon held at Squire Creek Country Club began with an overview of her experiences as a student from 1961 to 1965.

"When Willie Green asked me to say a few words about what I gained at Ruston High that was useful in later life, of course there were many things that came to mind," Brown said. "A number of my teachers were outstanding, and some were great inspirations.

"Also I have grown to appreciate several offerings in the curriculum that have had special value to me in my adult life such as participation in the debate program, studying Latin, and learning to write the English language."

In highlighting the depth of her experiences, next she detailed the social environment which allowed all students to excel according to their abilities and determination.

"... one very important thing I remember about Ruston High is something I will describe as a 'culture of opportunity,' she continued. "There were many avenues for both academic and extracur-

ricular development at Ruston High, but I want to comment today from the perspective of a female student at RHS in the early 1960's.

"The culture at RHS at that time was that women students were expected to be full participants in the classroom and in student activities. They were encouraged to assume leadership roles in school organizations. This was the norm at RHS, but it was not the norm everywhere."

Her credentials as a Certified Public Accountant and the progressive and outstanding career she pursued mostly in the San Francisco area gave her ample means by which to compare experiences.

"In the 40-plus years since I left RHS I have become acquainted with many women of my era who attended other high schools in other cities," she elaborated. "Some of them were significantly larger schools and considered more progressive or offered a broader curriculum.

"But girls at other schools were sometimes discouraged from taking the difficult courses — or most extracurricular activities were the

domain of the boys — or peer pressure made them feel that they should underperform. In short, it was the boys who were expected to excel."

Brown said that she did not mean to say that everything at Ruston High was open to the girls. In athletics, for example, in the 1960's the football field / the basketball court / the track — they all belonged to the boys, and the girls were on the sidelines, she explained. Some organizations were open only to boys, just as some were exclusively for the girls, she added.

"But there were many extracurricular activities that developed women as achievers for a wider world, activities that developed useful skills and provided leadership opportunities based on one's interests and abilities, not on gender," she said.

"The debate program was an excellent example. Anne Mitchell came to RHS in the early 60's to build the program, and she was an extraordinarily gifted teacher.

"We competed in tournaments around the state and our primary competitors were the large parochial high schools in south Louisiana which had long-established programs in debate and public speaking. Ruston was more or less the new kid on the block."

To this day, Brown recalls numbers and statistics which indicate the excellence of the RHS Debate Team.

"If you participated in debate, the important thing was to qualify for a statewide tournament in the spring called the Tournament of Champions," she explained. "In my senior year there were 22 students from Ruston High who qualified and we were very proud because that was a large number for a school our size with a relatively new program. Of those 22 students who qualified, 15 were girls. We

competed, and we competed well, and we were heady with a sense of accomplishment."

Brown recalled the widespread female presence in many of the student activities and organizations, too.

"In journalism, girls were also at the forefront: the two co-editors of the yearbook were girls. The editor of the student newspaper was a girl who is now a professor of creative writing at Dartmouth. The Student Council was roughly 50 / 50 boys and girls, but the president of the Student Council, arguably the highest position of student leadership in the school, was a girl, my good friend Mary Margaret Storey van Diest. I believe this was, in the mid-1960's, somewhat remarkable for that time," Brown recalled.

In closing her remarks, Brown said this "culture of opportunity" sent her off to college thinking very open-mindedly about academic possibilities.

"I chose to study accounting and finance, a path not taken by many female students at that time, but it was an excellent choice for me," she said. "I felt comfortable considering several different career paths for the years beyond. I left Ruston High believing that doors would be open rather than closed. I was looking for opportunities and I have benefited greatly from that way of thinking."



Brown