

# NOTHING HALFWAY ABOUT MIDWAY

Midway University has come a long way since its founding as the Kentucky Female Orphan School

By Maryjean Wall



MIDWAY UNIVERSITY

Midway University encompasses 200 bucolic acres in the midst of prime horse country, an incentive for many students.



For students at the forerunner of Midway University, campus life in the early 20th century combined academics with such menial tasks as milking cows and cleaning floors. The all-female school expected discipline and decorum, even from its faculty. Instructor Lucy Peterson, who chronicled life at what was then the Kentucky Female Orphan School, suffered a scolding from the school's superintendent, also a woman. Her offense: lifting her skirt too high above her shoe tops to keep the hem from touching Midway's dusty Main Street.

No doubt Peterson would have lauded the recent, profound changes Midway University has embraced to suit the new times.

Co-ed education, expanded online graduate programs, champion sports teams, and the word "university" attached to the name of former Midway College are the new Midway University. The campus has a different aura than 10 years ago. You can feel the vibrancy, sense of hope, and openness. Students such as sophomore Ruby Tevis have felt the changes. "I have seen improvements," she said. "And in talking to my friends who are upperclassmen, they've been very happy with improvements, with adding new programs and new professors."

The school continues to occupy 200 of the most serene, bucolic acres in horse country. The stone-bridge entrance gives the impression of a horse farm, apropos since the university does have a herd of about 37 horses that belong to its equine studies and competitive riding program. Horses have long been important to Midway University and surrounding farms, where historic breeding operations such as Woodburn contributed in the 1800s to the rise of Kentucky's horse industry.

The city of Midway feels like a town because of its small population (1,811), adding



President John P. Marsden, Ph.D., is credited with breathing new life into the school by tackling its debts and transforming it into a 21st century institution of higher learning.

MIDWAY UNIVERSITY PHOTOS

to its charm. Students can walk downtown from campus in just five minutes. Railroad tracks run neatly through the town's center, lined by shops and restaurants that also draw patrons from Lexington and beyond.

Mayor Grayson Vandegrift describes these six restaurants as "almost world class," and few would disagree. "There's a feel that you get from the university, just like you get from the restaurants, that adds to the charm," he said.

### Averting closure

The university's narrative is notched with all kinds of fascinating twists and turns since

opening its doors in 1849 as the Kentucky Female Orphan School. The current narrative is equally fascinating. The school is rebounding and paying off \$11 million in debt (plus an additional \$3 million borrowed later to make payroll) that John P. Marsden, Ph.D., encountered when he took over as president in 2013. When he arrived from a provost role at Barton College in Wilson, North Carolina, the college had a damaged reputation with enrollment declines and a strapping financial burden.

If the university had closed, huge opportunities would have been lost for students and the city. As the city's second-largest

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employer, with 114 full-timers and 137 part-timers on the payroll, the university is a major contributor of payroll tax. On the student side, those such as Tevis, who chose the school for its serenity, would have been out of luck. “I wanted the country lifestyle to help me get through the stress of college,” Tevis said. “That was what really pushed me over to Midway.”

Upon assuming the presidency, Marsden rolled up his sleeves and went to work. “I will say the turnaround turned out to be a heck of a lot harder than I imagined. I didn’t know it would take so long, be so hard, and at times be so ugly,” he said.

### Tough decisions

A most formidable obstacle in the school’s departure down its new path was debt. Marsden said he was aware the school faced financial difficulties before he took the job; he simply did not realize how deep these problems went. A few months later, during the summer of 2013, he realized the school would need to borrow to make payroll due to cash flow shortages.

Under Marsden’s direction, the school initiated some radical belt tightening. Layoffs began. As well, “a lot of people jumped ship because they thought we were sinking,” he said. “There was a lot of turnover.”

He called the layoffs the lowest point he experienced. “It was my first presidency, we’re six months in, and we’re laying off people,” he said. “You never want to have to impact people’s lives like that.”

He says 2015 was the year the school began to turn around. The school had begun paying off its debt and has reduced its financial obligations to about \$11 million. The school has a \$30 million endowment, “so our financial ratios are pretty good,” Marsden said. Enrollment is up, and the new Midway University was awarded a reaffirmation of its accreditation. Reaffirmation means everything to a higher-education institution because without it, students cannot receive financial aid.

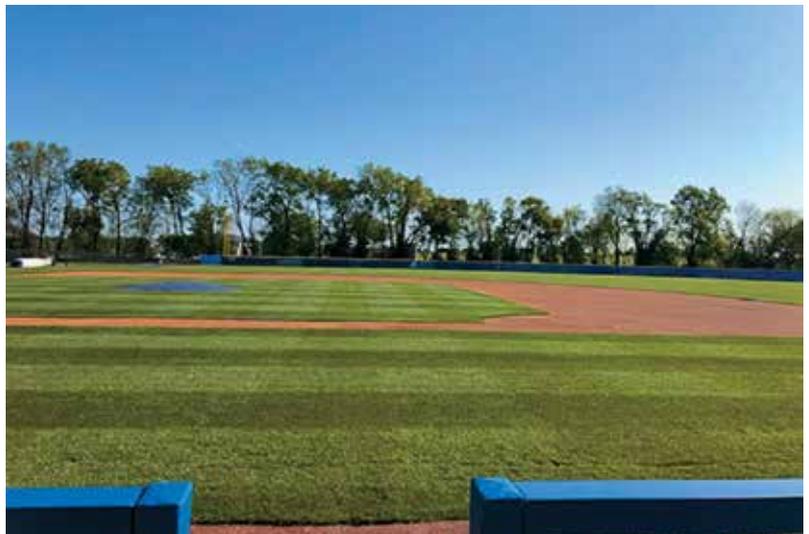
“We have a lot of need-based students,” said Ellen Gregory, vice president of marketing. First-year daytime undergraduate students receive an average of \$13,200 in financial aid. This is applied toward tuition costs of \$24,500 annually, with residence fees ranging from \$3,200 to \$5,400 and dining programs from \$3,000 to \$4,200. Academic and athletic scholarships reduce these costs for a number of students.

### Going co-ed among big changes

Marsden identified the change to co-ed status as the single most important factor in turning around the school’s decline of the past



Students sporting the school colors gather in the university’s amphitheater.



A financial campaign helped fund the Tracy Farmer-Don Ball Baseball Stadium and Dick Robinson Field.

decade. He cites research showing that only 2 percent of high school seniors want to go to colleges limited to one gender. Given that information, Midway opted to change.

Another factor that played hugely in the turnaround was changing the name of the school from Midway College to Midway University in 2015. The word “college” is confused with high school in some foreign countries, according to Marsden, so this helped clear up misconceptions about the curriculum and degrees offered. Two percent of the undergraduate population is international. As Midway had also added graduate programs to the curriculum, it was better named a “university.”

With a new name and no longer restricted to educating only

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The inviting Central Kentucky landscape comes right to the school's doorsteps, which appeals to students such as Ruby Tevis. "I wanted the country lifestyle to help me get through the stress of college," said Tevis, a member of the equestrian team.

women, Midway's enrollment went from 239 in spring of 2016 (when the college was for women only) to 643 this past autumn. Those numbers were for undergraduates attending classes on campus, whether commuting or living in campus residences. Overall the enrollment is 1,700, including online, dual credit, and graduate students.

"He's made huge strides," Vandegrift said. "I think they were looking at possible financial insolvency. And now they're building things, and all their numbers are going up every year."

Adding men's athletics proved another big boost for the school. Marsden said the school was going to begin admitting

men for fall classes in 2016 without offering athletics until 2017. All changed when the president of St. Catharine College in Springfield contacted Marsden. St. Catharine was facing closure, due to financial difficulties, and wondered whether Midway would consider absorbing some of its men's athletic teams.

Midway rushed to make the changes to accommodate men's athletics a year ahead of schedule. "In less than 100 days we went from Kentucky's only female school to fully co-ed with men's athletic teams, one of which is baseball, and we didn't have a baseball field," Marsden said.

It does now. The athletics program benefited from a financial campaign launched to build a baseball stadium, a field house, and enhancements to some campus buildings.

### Importance of athletics

Athletics are a big part of the Midway University experience. As of this past autumn, the school had 24 athletic teams, including two equestrian teams. More than 500 students are athletes competing in two athletic conferences. The women's golf team has won conference championships in four



Going co-ed has boosted Midway's attendance, with undergraduate enrollment going to 643 last fall from 239 in the spring of 2016 when the school was for women only.



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*Hunter Field House, named for school trustee Janet Green Hunter, goes up.*

successive years. The men's baseball team was conference champion in 2017.

The famed equine program also is doing well after some adjustments.

The original program, started in 1978, offered a degree in equine office administration. Today, Midway offers a program in equine rehabilitation as well as courses that help make its graduates more employable.

“When I first came here there was a lot of emphasis on riding horses and less on curriculum and how to manage a horse and manage a farm,” Marsden said. “We

met with some industry representatives in 2014, and they were candid with us: They didn't want to hire our students because all they wanted to do was ride. And that's not what all of the industry is about. So, we revamped the curriculum and made it a lot more hands-on with a business and science foundation.”

Today's program has approximately 120 students — about half from out of state — and 37 horses, including Thoroughbreds, Quarter Horses, and warmbloods. Midway fields two riding teams — hunt seat and Western — that



MARK MAHAN

## MIDWAY POLICY CHANGES DUE TO VIRUS

As it has done throughout its history, Midway University continues to adjust to challenges it faces. Due to the COVID-19 virus, the university made adjustments to assist current and incoming students. When the virus forced residential students to leave campus, the university transitioned from face-to-face to online instruction.

For incoming students, the school announced it would be test-optional for fall 2020 to assist students who were impacted by the closing of ACT/SAT testing sites. Additionally, the university is freezing its tuition rates for all student populations for the coming academic year. Lastly, the university will honor merit aid offers to previously admitted students from fall 2019 if there are students who wish to transfer closer to home in response to the virus.



HANNAH WA BOWMAN

*The school's equine program has expanded to offer a curriculum in equine rehabilitation as well as classes to make graduates more employable.*

## REVIVAL MOVEMENT INTERTWINED WITH MIDWAY U'S FOUNDING

Overcoming challenges is intertwined with Midway University's story. Indeed, it faced a big one right from the start: In 1847, the school received a state charter but did not have the money it needed to build a school.

James Ware Parish Sr., an elder in the Midway Christian (Disciples of Christ) Church, worked hard to persuade his many influential friends to donate. Parish and the orphan school's founder, Dr. Lewis Letig Pinkerton, pastor of this church, were both eager to open such a school because they were caught up in a zeal for social justice and reform. These ideals continued to thrive nearly 50 years following a millennial movement of camp meetings that had swept through Kentucky and other states at the beginning of the century. Pinkerton, born in 1812, wasn't alive for the original revivals yet was greatly influenced by the preaching of religious leaders who emerged from that era. He took his greatest inspiration from Alexander Campbell and Barton Stone, leaders whose preaching styles both were formed in the movement.

Stone had been an organizer at the Cane Ridge Meeting House revival in Bourbon County. For nearly a week in 1801, some 20,000 people had wept and prayed and spoken in tongues and even fainted in religious ecstasy at this, the greatest of all camp meetings held in the United States. The enduring influence of Cane Ridge and its link



CHARLES BERTRAM/LEXINGTON HERALD-LEADER PHOTOS

*The revival at Cane Ridge Meeting House in Bourbon County played a role in Midway University's founding.*

to the orphan school cannot be overstated. Pinkerton's church at Midway even invited Stone and Campbell to preach in later years as guests at the church.

When the Kentucky Female Orphan School finally opened in 1849, 16 students and one teacher assembled for classes. The orphan school was never intended to be an orphanage. Pinkerton and Parish envisioned it as a school to educate young women so they, in turn, could teach others in public schools.

School life was disciplined and difficult, although the girls reportedly grew fond of their demanding campus life. The school required students to help cook, serve in the dining hall, wash dishes, clean the floors, wash bed linen, and milk the cows. Most of these girls must have realized the school offered them the best chance they could hope for, because young women had few options except to "teach, marry, or be an old maid," as instructor Lucy Peterson wrote in 1905.

"The girls' rooms in Pinkerton Hall were not lighted by lamps," she wrote. "Each room was given two candles on Monday and they must last the room for a week." Gasoline



*Reform movement preachers such as Alexander Campbell and Barton Stone later preached at the school founder's Midway church.*

lamps were added in 1906 but not in the residence halls. Lamps were placed only in the study halls and dining room.

No doubt the young women told ghost stories on nights when they huddled together for warmth in their dark, unheated rooms. Still other stories involving the orphan

compete in the Intercollegiate Horse Show Association. Each team has 30 to 35 riders.

The hunt seat team under coach Heath Gunnison ranks consistently among the region's best, and this year the Western team, under new coach Conner Smith, won the regional championship for the first time in 12 years. Several Midway students were to par-

ticipate in the Western national just before the event was canceled due to the COVID-19 outbreak.

The program uses three facilities, the original being the Keeneland Equine Center, known as the Keeneland Barn, built in the mid-1980s. The program also has indoor and outdoor arenas, lab and classroom space, and

plenty of pasture for the horses. All told, the Midway program encompasses 150 acres.

Midway graduates and current students work in a variety of equine positions, including for major farms such as WinStar, Ashford Stud, Lane's End, and Three Chimneys. They also have jobs at the major veterinary clinics and groups such as the American



*A melodeon that once was played at Sunday services at Midway Christian Church is now displayed in the school's library.*

school were quite real, such as the caper involving the stolen church organ. This story, like the founders of the school, harkened to the Cane Ridge revival and the "new lights," or progressives, who came away from the meeting desiring church reform. They found themselves in conflict with those who feared change. The use of musical instruments in church services became a lightning rod between the two groups.

Some congregants at Midway Christian were shocked to discover a melodeon installed in 1860 for their Sunday services. Pinkerton brought the small organ in to the church partly because the singing among the congregants was so deplorable that it would "scare even the rats from worship," the pastor lamented. But he was a progressive. Not all congregants in his church were happy to see a musical instrument in their midst. They regarded the melodeon as

Association of Equine Practitioners. Some graduates go to vet school, including the premier College of Veterinary Medicine at Auburn University.

Vandegrift credits a lot of Midway U's newfound success to Marsden's determination and vision. "He's just a very intelligent, measured, and generally nice person," the



*From 1849 until 2016, Midway University permitted only women students.*

an "instrument of Satan."

A church elder named Adam Hibler belonged to that group. He was determined to see the melodeon removed and decided to act. One night he led his slave, Reuben, to the church to steal the offending instrument. Hibler sent Reuben through a window, ordered him to lift the small melodeon, and to hand it to Hibler standing outside. Accounts differ on the melodeon's fate.

A website titled "History of the Restoration Movement" tells how Hibler hid the melodeon in his barn, where he'd also stored a souvenir of the Cane Ridge Meeting House, removed years previously.

A pamphlet distributed by Midway University tells a slightly different story, reporting that the melodeon was found years later, not in Hibler's barn but inside a private home in Versailles.

Wherever it was residing, the little melodeon was rescued from hiding. It was given to the school, where it continues to reside,

mayor said. "To me, it comes down to leadership. Everything's about leadership."

The mayor also talked about improved town-and-gown relationships with the university. "About a decade ago I never saw much outreach from the university to the city," he said. Vandegrift meets frequently with Marsden, "We go over what's going on

encased in glass inside the campus library.

The inestimable Peterson wrote how the name Kentucky Female Orphan School served the institution well until, she figured, the 1920s when the trustees began seriously considering a change. The problem with the word "orphan," by the time of the 1920s, she wrote, was people confused it with an orphanage. The trustees mailed letters to alumnae and friends of the school inquiring how they would

react to a name change.

"Some declared the change unthinkable because the school had made a nationwide name for itself," she wrote. But those in favor also pointed out that using "Kentucky" made the school sound like a state institution and the use of "female" was obsolete. Among names suggested were Woodford County Collegiate Institute, Fincastle School for Girls, Pinkerton College, College-on-the-Hill, Half-way College, Midway School for Girls, and Pinkerton-Parrish School.

Change occurred slowly. The school did not change its name until 1942. The female orphan school became Midway Junior College combined with Pinkerton High School. What did not change was the demographic: These remained girls' schools. The change to co-ed education at the undergraduate level on campus took place only four years ago in 2016. In modern times the school maintains only a loose connection with the Midway Christian Church.

in the town and at the university and how we can work together. It's been great."

Marsden said of the turnaround: "It is a tremendous feeling, and I didn't do it alone."

Surely our historical arbiter, Miss Lucy Peterson, would agree that it was time to change and that Midway University handled the change well. **KM**