# Georgia Tech's Proud History of Women Leaders

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This past week Val and I attended the 11th Annual Women in Engineering Excellence Award Banquet, where we were overwhelmed by all of the amazing young women we talked to and met. Reflecting on that experience, it is hard to believe that for the first 67 years, Georgia Tech did not admit women into its full-time programs. Thanks to the bold leadership of Blake Van Leer, Tech's fifth president, they are today a vital and important part of Georgia Tech.

For Van Leer, the quest was highly personal. His wife, Ella Wall Van Leer, earned a degree in Architecture from the University of California. However, because of Tech's restrictions on the admission of women, his daughter, Maryly, had to attend Vanderbilt in order to pursue her degree in chemical engineering.

In 1947, President Van Leer proposed a change in this policy to the Board of Regents. At the time, the concept was very controversial: arguments against it included the need to rearrange dorms and classes and to modify speech, conduct, and appearance. Others claimed that girls at Tech were an "academic distraction" or that it would mean poorer seats at football games.

The regents rejected President Van Leer's co-ed proposal. But Georgia Tech and the women of Atlanta persisted.

Van Leer enlisted Tech's librarian, Dorothy Crosland, to help his wife, Ella, mobilize local women's groups. The *Atlanta Women's Chamber of Commerc*e formally petitioned the regents, a petition that was supported by a resolution from Tech's undergraduate student council.

On April 9, 1952, the regents voted 7-5 to admit women on a full-time basis, but limited admission to programs not offered at other units within the University System of Georgia, such as engineering or architecture. That limited admission policy continued until it was abolished in 1968.

Tech's first two female graduates, Diane Michel and Shirley Clements, graduated in 1956. Responding to one of the most frequently asked questions, Clements said that, no, the reason she came to Tech was not to find a husband.

"Any girl who does is getting one the hard way," she said. "…this is such a tough school, and the girls who come here for a lark don't last long enough to get married."

Her accomplishments at Tech and as an alumna were hardly a lark.

In 2000, Shirley Clements Mewborn retired as vice president and treasurer of Southern Engineering, capping a 41-year career. For her leadership and inspiration to thousands of Tech women, our softball complex, Shirley Clements Mewborn Field, is named in her memory.

Today, Tech is the number one producer of women engineers in the country. Thirty percent of our 20,000 students are women. And I'm proud to say women now occupy 42 percent of the leadership positions in our 400 student organizations, including positions as president of both the undergraduate and graduate student government associations.

At the banquet, we not only recognized the accomplishments of our women students, we also awarded 120 scholarships worth more than $140,000.

This is both a reflection of our past and a precursor of our future. Many of our female graduates have been trailblazers in their chosen fields, making history on the ground and amid the stars.

Today, there are 18 female Georgia Tech graduates working at NASA. In 1992, Tech's first alumna to become an astronaut boarded the Shuttle Endeavour and took to the skies. Today, Jan Davis (Bio '75) is a veteran of three space shuttle flights, and serves as deputy director of the Flight Project Directorate at the Marshall Space Center. Susan Still Kilrain (MS, AE '85) made astronaut history in 1997 as a member of the first shuttle crew to fly back-to-back missions and was the second woman to pilot the space shuttle.

As underscored by these handful of examples, it is clear that here at Tech we are not just preparing our graduates for jobs, we are preparing them for careers and for leadership in a rapidly changing world.

Thanks to the leadership of President Van Leer and our rigorous academic programs with their strong focus on leadership, today all of our students, both men and women, have the potential and opportunity to help shape our world and make it a better place.

President Van Leer had the pleasure of seeing his daughter Maryly enroll at Tech as its first female PhD student. Unfortunately, President Van Leer did not live to see the first woman graduate from Tech. But, being the visionary he was, I have no doubt that he would have been as proud to be there and to witness the success of the women of Georgia Tech as Val and I were.