

## **CROSSING THE DIGITAL DIVIDE: THE STORY OF THE ESTABLISHMENT OF A WEBSITE FOR TOWN AND GOWN OF USC**

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***Writer's comments: This story is an example of how Town and Gown of USC has evolved over the years. In recent years, our Board of Directors has become more open to new ideas, as a new generation of the Trojan Family has joined our leadership ranks, reflecting the accelerating pace of society as a whole. For as long as I can remember, Town and Gown was a leader amongst organizations at USC, and that leadership is destined to continue. We were one of the first organizations at USC to have a website. I believe that this trailblazing is due to strong leadership by our Board over the years, and it continues our independence as an organization and as an important partner of the University.***

**During my first year as President of Town and Gown of USC, I heard a lot about the growth of websites beyond just the trendy .com tech bubble. Websites were starting to emerge for established companies and organizations, and I quickly thought that a website was a good idea for Town and Gown as well. It seems strange in retrospect to think that although websites were common-place in the early 2000's, most websites were devoted to selling something or sharing information. The idea of promoting an institution and facilitating internal activities of that institution was still a rarity.**

**The first step toward bringing Town and Gown into the digital age was doing research to see what types of organizations had websites outside of the popular e-commerce arena. The USC President's Office**

confirmed that the University had a website that was starting to evolve, but the individual schools within the University were not yet maintaining their own websites.

Service organizations such as Rotary, Soroptimists and Lions' Club were also not yet using websites at the local, national or international levels. Only one out of about 15 churches surveyed was even thinking about launching a website. Several school districts that I contacted, including Los Angeles Unified, had yet to embrace a website.

I initially discussed the idea with a few of the Board of Directors, and received a generally positive response. At the March 2003 Town and Gown Board meeting I made the initial proposal, including a description of what a website might include, the value for Town and Gown and some general costs associated with the development, launch and ongoing maintenance. A couple of the members who had knowledge of websites expressed their positive experiences and supported the idea as a good one for Town and Gown. The reactions ranged from enthusiastic support to bitter opposition. Many of the Board of Directors were unconvinced of the value of having a website, and were concerned about the ongoing expense associated with such an endeavor. There were thoughts that a website was only for younger people. A few said that "We want to stay as we are."

The discussion during this meeting was quite contentious, and I could tell that some of the members of the Board of Directors were lobbying other members to vote against moving forward. At this point, it was obvious to me that our Board was not yet ready to vote on the concept of establishing a website.

I suggested that we form a committee that would meet over the summer to discuss this idea and bring back their report in the Fall. To my surprise, 15 members were interested in serving on this

committee. Although I felt that 15 was too many for a committee, I decided to go forward with that group given the diversity of opinions expressed in the meeting. I appointed Judy Pohlmann to serve as Chair, as she was working at the time on a website project for a well-known company. The committee met frequently throughout the summer of 2003. The committee members represented the range of opinions including those strongly opposed and in favor, as well as those who were interested in the idea but felt that they wanted to learn more before proceeding. The discussions were highly professional. One member was especially helpful in sharing how she communicated with her 90 year old grandfather in Florida frequently by e-mail to stress the idea that a website could be for all ages.

By the end of the summer, the committee was fairly positive about the idea of starting a website, and in November 2003 the website decision was on the Board agenda. As chair of the summer committee, Judy Pohlmann made a brief report about the meetings and then made a motion to approve the establishment of a website for Town and Gown. The motion was approved unanimously. When the motion had passed, Judy stated that there was a need for \$1,500 to move forward with the development of the website. I knew that we had the money available to pay for the website, but before we entered into a discussion on using Town and Gown funds, a voice behind me said: "I'll pay for it." I turned to see Board member Jan Dyer with her checkbook out with pen in hand asking how she should make out the check.

Jeff Rector of Millennium Concepts was our initial contractor for website development. It was announced that vice presidents and committee chairs would be responsible to submit information about their committee on the website. Jan Dyer served as our first Webmaster. She and Judy Pohlmann worked with the contractor in

helping him become acquainted with Town and Gown as an organization.

In early 2004, Jan announced that “Coming Soon” postcards would be sent to all members announcing that Town and Gown had a website. A special commemorative announcement about the website was shared with those who attended the Centennial Gala held at Town and Gown. The website address was put on a white card and placed in a silver picture frame that served as a favor for the event.

The debut of the website coincided with the last Centennial event of the year, the Sunday afternoon tea for Town and Gown members at the Mudd Estate with President and Mrs. Sample. The official launch date was May 1, 2004, and photos from the tea were put on the website.

Since Town and Gown did not have its own logo at the time, the University approved the temporary use of their logo on our website. When we launched the website, the address was:

*townandgownusc.com*, a domain name that Town and Gown still owns, but now reroutes to our familiar *townandgownofusc.org*.

Monthly website updates included: A message from the President, History of Town and Gown written by Jo Ann Conley, photo gallery, articles, information about scholarship committee and other items as needed. Even after the initial launch there was some stagnation, redesigns and reboots in the years that followed, but the groundwork was laid for our digital future.

Again, it does seem shocking, and rather quaint that there was a time, not that long ago, when Town and Gown (and many organizations) did not have a website. In retrospect, it is a bit amusing that adding a website was a rather controversial decision at the time. Just think about that the next time that you register for a meeting online, or

**conduct Board business or interact with our scholars at**  
*[townandgownofusc.org](http://townandgownofusc.org).*