

Vira I. Heinz was so moved by the life-changing power of foreign travel that she bestowed the gift upon generations of young women.



Marcia Sutherland's keepsakes from her Vira Heinz Travel Award trip include a tipping guide and an international driver's license. Under-scoring how unusual it was for young women to travel alone in Europe in the 1950s is a Pittsburgh Press feature story on returnees mentoring those next in line.



# Virra's

## Young Ladies

By Brian Connelly

It was the summer of 1958 and Marcia Sutherland, a 20-year-old University of Pittsburgh student traveling alone on her first overseas trip, discovered a critical yet unadvertised benefit from touring the Baroque churches of Naples. The places of worship, with their breathtaking architecture and splendid works of art, also provided solid sanctuary from the wolf-whistling Italian men trailing her relentlessly through the narrow streets.

"They thought I was Swedish because I was a natural blonde and I did not have very stylish shoes," remembers

Sutherland, now 65 and much more worldly. "I had good walking shoes with heavy soles and steel-tipped toes.

So the Italian men would follow me around, which wasn't so bad, but they would take my elbow, and they would walk shoulder to shoulder and go through their repertoire of languages. Sometimes they would walk me right off the sidewalk into the street. I went up to some *carabinieri* to complain and all they did was laugh at me, look me up and down and say, 'What do you expect?'"

Now living in Montclair, N.J., near her daughter and four grandchildren, Sutherland has made challenging foreign travel a regular part of her life, visiting India each year since 1984. She moans self-mockingly about that younger, more impressionable version of herself and marvels at all the

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A fashionably dressed Vira I. Heinz poses on an outside deck during a transatlantic crossing in 1925; Clifford and Vira strolling together several years before he was felled by pneumonia in 1935.

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stereotypes laid bare, the assumptions that caved, and all the little dramas that loomed so large to a college girl traveling abroad for the first time.

Her self-discovery in world discovery was made possible through a little-known travel scholarship program founded by the widow of one of the sons of the founder of the H.J. Heinz Co. Among the region's A-list families, Vira Ingham Heinz was a sharp society hostess who used her connections to win others over to her charitable efforts. She also was a rare presence in male-dominated power centers: the first woman to serve on the H.J. Heinz Co. board and Carnegie Mellon University's Board of Trustees. She was sought after for her deft touch in developing community support for public projects. But she also engaged in personal philanthropy in the tradition of the Heinz family model: providing resources to allow people to better themselves.

As was the case with most of the several hundred young women whose eyes have been widened by the experience of a Vira Heinz Travel Award during the past 48 years, Sutherland never met her benefactor. But she learned enough about Vira Heinz to understand how much she treasured her own frequent expeditions to foreign countries and why she wanted to provide

the experience for others who could never have afforded it.

"It gave me a lot of confidence about what I could do myself," says Sutherland. "There were not many young American women traveling alone in 1958. It gave me a feel for being a citizen of the world." In the two decades after World War II, Vira Heinz's steadfast support made a dramatic difference in the lives of those young women fortunate

enough to win the awards. But the larger public notoriety from her involvement helped end gender-based inequities in travel-study opportunities for women generally.

Since the 1970s, women winning the award have moved beyond the single purpose of a travel experience to use it as an opportunity to add depth to a major course of study, or to test a possible career choice. For example, this year's winner from the University of Pittsburgh, engineering student Carrie Davis, discovered the world of materials science while working in a renewable energy program at the University of New South Wales in Australia. She now plans to go on to graduate school to better prepare herself for a career developing products like the energy

storage device she saw demonstrated on

the other side of the world. "They are waiting for someone in the materials community to come up with the perfect membrane, and I want it to be me," says Davis.

The roots of a program capable of generating such promise run back to the early 1950s. At that time, travel scholarships were handed out informally as part of the programming





Vira's decision to underwrite travel-study opportunities for women was inspired by a close group of friends she called "the girls." They included, from left, Ruth Crawford Mitchell, who designed and directed the University of Pittsburgh Nationality Rooms; Maxine Bruhns, current director and coordinator of Pitt's Vira I. Heinz program; Savina Skewis, who rose to become Dean of Women at Pitt; and Helen Pool Rush, Skewis' predecessor as Dean.



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around the 26 Nationality Rooms of the Cathedral of Learning, a 42-story Gothic tower that rules over the university's main campus in Pittsburgh's Oakland district. The Nationality Rooms were designed by sociologist Ruth

Crawford Mitchell as a way to carve out living memorials — they served as actual classrooms — to remind students of the immigrant cultures that made Pittsburgh an industrial powerhouse and put it on the international map.

Beginning in 1954, Vira Heinz began writing out a \$1,000 check from her private account each fall to a junior woman to pay for a summer in Europe. In the early decades, the winner came from the ranks of the Nationality Rooms tour guides, always jobs reserved for female students. But at a time when broadening the international horizons of young women was something few considered a priority, funds for the program were always scarce and unreliable, and the number of women who could participate was sharply limited.

Vira Heinz first became interested in the program thanks to the influence of a small circle of close friends, all women — she was still referring to them as "the girls" well into her 70s. Chief among them were Helen Pool Rush, the University of Pittsburgh's dean of women, and her assistant Savina Skewis.

Love of social events and the symphony brought the women together. "Helen and Savina were extremely outgoing

and social ladies," remembers Maxine Bruhns, the director of the Nationality Rooms since 1965. "They entertained a lot. They had a wealth of friends they would invite to dinner." The Oakland apartment that Rush and Skewis

shared a short walk from the university was a hot spot in cultured Pittsburgh society.

Vira Ingham was 44 when she married Clifford Heinz, second-oldest of company founder H. J. Heinz's three sons. After his death from pneumonia in 1935, she filled her life with family, friends and philanthropic causes. (She never remarried.) When she traveled, it always was in style, whether visiting Heinz operations in Europe by plane or vacation cruising on the Queen Elizabeth. She delighted in keeping friends up late at night after returning from a new corner of the world, full of stories and discoveries. It was Rush who encouraged Vira to share that gift of discovery with women from the University of Pittsburgh, assuring her friend that each winner would be of good character and make the most of her trip.

The program began first at the University of Pittsburgh, but after several years, Vira was so pleased with the results that she responded to requests from other schools to expand the program. Now overseen by The Heinz Endowments and administered through the University of Pittsburgh's Center for International Studies, the program has opened its doors to

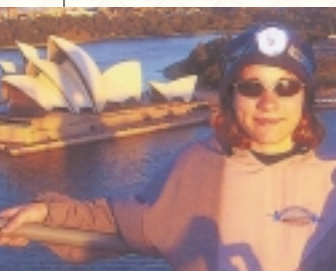
**"Winning the Vira Heinz Award  
influenced the course of my entire life."**

**Rachel BIRTHA EITCHES**

Research Specialist, Voice of America Radio



Carrie Davis (below), one of this year's Vira Heinz award winners, chose "Down Under" Australia for a significant university program on renewable energy. The expanded breadth of travel and study expectations shows dramatic changes in the program.



young women at schools throughout the region. This year alone, 12 scholarships were awarded to women attending schools in West

Virginia and Ohio, in addition to western Pennsylvania. Not only has the number of recipients grown, so too has the amount of the scholarship and the allowed area of travel. Typically, the winners will receive \$5,000, and while Europe is still a popular destination, there have been trips approved to Cuba, India, China and Nigeria.

While there were few study and reporting requirements for the early winners, the expectations on those in the current program are considerable. They are expected to do research on a topic that is connected in some way to the Pittsburgh region and its needs. "We recognize that even if many of these women haven't actually been out of the United States, modern technology like the Internet and the global reach of other media have made the world more accessible," says The Heinz Endowments' Joe Dominic. Not only are students better prepared, he says, "but they are culturally more adaptable; it's easier for them to travel. So we ask for more of a study focus with the idea that these women need to have this kind of experience if they are going to be future leaders in their professions."

Recent winners have taken on daunting projects ranging from Davis' research in Australia on renewable energy sources to 2000 University of Pittsburgh winner Elizabeth Bowen's studies in India on how domestic violence reduction strategies might be useful to U.S. social workers. Bowen, now using her foreign research in a graduate program in social work,

found that women not capable of pulling themselves out of abusive relationships with men often respond well to negotiated approaches, where they are counseled to exert some control measures to protect themselves.

While there is more academic structure to these trips, the women still manage to report their share of life-changing adventures. Still, for sheer charm and spunk, it is difficult to top the stories of the University of Pittsburgh women from the 1950s and 1960s. Consider the scores of black-and-white snapshots tucked away in drawers, but all carrying the same general scene: a 20-year-old girl on departure, often the first in her family to make it to college, waving nervously to anxious relatives from the deck of an ocean liner, wondering how she will survive her trek alone through Europe, and wondering who she will be when she returns.

For Joan Dickerson, who won in 1963, the process was laden with matronly tradition. "The Dean of Women's office grabbed hold of us, and an older woman mentored a younger woman. We learned to serve high tea. We were never called 'girls,' always 'our young ladies' and 'young university women.'"

The stamp that Vira Heinz and her administrator friends put on the program sharpened the "ladies with dignity" identity, says Dickerson. "That scholarship and the chance to go to Europe were well advertised. Others had gone before... and there would be conversations back and forth about Europe. You weren't getting any old scholarship. You were getting the Vira Heinz Award. It was a big deal."

Marcia Sutherland already knew something about Europe when she won in 1958. Her grandfather, Milan Getting, edited the Slovak-language, pro-democracy newspaper *Slovensky Sokol*.



The 1963 winner, Joan Dickerson, as she appeared senior year in the University of Pittsburgh OWL Yearbook's Hall of Fame section for her travel-study achievement; and Dickerson today in Pittsburgh. Her Vira Heinz travel led to a Fulbright Scholarship to Germany, where she studied mathematics. She now works in technology transfer for the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health.

Photo by Richard Kelly





"I took my finals early and went on the Queen Elizabeth, a week before Memorial Day. There were relatively few young people. Mainly they were people who seemed to be making their tenth trip across to Europe — well off. Naturally, I was down in tourist cabin."

But when she arrived in Paris, there was that first, wonderfully exhausting experience of The Louvre; there was exotic coffee and French pastries at sidewalk cafes. There was the architecture of Vienna, where she was only able to get a glimpse of Czech land at the border. She had been warned by family members not to cross over. "In 1958, it was the height of the paranoia of the communists," says Sutherland. "Because of my grandfather's reputation, my whole family was blacklisted." A cousin had made the mistake of returning for a visit; he was arrested and questioned for hours. "The police knew more about our family than my cousin did," she remembers.

Dickerson, the daughter of a postal clerk who grew up steeped in the African-American culture of the Hill District, had never traveled farther than Girl Scout camp in a nearby county. In June 1963, she arrived at Pier 91 in Manhattan by Greyhound bus from Pittsburgh (her father went along to see her off). She wrote in her journal that the ship pulled from its dock at 4 p.m. and cruised past the Statue of Liberty a half-hour later. She traveled hard through the major cities of Europe and much of the beginning portion was a blur. But what wasn't lost on her, she remembers, was the way in which she was treated as a black woman in the cities. While there were dozens of cities in the United States that would have denied her a hotel room based on the color of her skin, that was not the case in Europe.

"Europe was my first encounter with a lack of prejudice. I had never been out of the environment of prejudice before then," she remembers. "I didn't know what it was like to live without it. Here [in the United States], white people treat you as if you're invisible. In Europe, I was not invisible."

Race relations were still a hot-button issue a decade later when Rachel BIRTHA EITCHES won one of Vira Heinz's travel scholarships. A native of Philadelphia, EITCHES became fascinated with Balkan folk dancing while in high school. "An exotic thing for an African-American girl at the time," she laughs. While at the University of Pittsburgh, she studied with the

Tamburitzans Eastern European dance troupe. Some blacks and whites objected to her doing dances not connected with African-American culture. But EITCHES persevered. "I never wanted to be defined by race in ways that kept me out of international things," she says.

In the midst of EITCHES' journey through Europe, news began coming in from the United States about Robert Kennedy's assassination. "I remember looking at the roadside memorials that people made." She remembers writing in her travel journal about feeling as if she were deserting friends and family who were enduring grief and rioting — some of it around her own neighborhood. In Spain, EITCHES surprised herself by standing up to argue with critics who saw only chaos and discrimination in American democracy.

It was during that turbulent summer, on a maiden voyage to Europe paid for through the largess of a Pittsburgh woman she barely knew, that EITCHES says she grew beyond all expectations. She began to believe she had the power to do anything she wanted with her life. She took advantage of more foreign study opportunities, including attending school in India. Eventually, she earned a doctorate in cross-cultural communications. EITCHES began a career reporting in Hindi and Urdu language programs on the Voice of America radio service and later directed Kurdish programming. She now produces "New American Voices," a Voice of America program interviewing recent immigrants to the United States.

"Winning the Vira Heinz Award," EITCHES says, "influenced the course of my entire life." *b*