



The 22-year Tailgate Crew includes future Dukes and their parents, Kenn Picardi ('82), Patty Miller Picardi ('83), Larry Howard ('82), Kevin Norris ('83), Peter Solberg ('81), Kim Leckenby ('83), Paula White Searle ('82) and Mark Searle ('82) with current student Elyse Choquette (center). "This is the core group," says Mark Searle. "Others join occasionally, and we all met as freshmen and sophomores in Hanson Hall." (Not pictured): Philip Cardillo ('82), Rick McCarthy ('82) and Jim Wulff ('83).

Photos by Diane Elliott ('00)

The 22-year Tailgate Crew

Acceptance letters to JMU in the late 1970s and residency in Hanson Hall brought them together. Purple pride, lifelong friendships and the love of Madison has brought them back to

Homecoming for 22 years straight.

"After 22 years, we've turned Homecoming tailgating into an art form," laughs Mark Searle ('82), a client sales executive for EDS Corp. Searle is married to Paula White Searle ('82), and they live in Chantilly, Va.

Beat that with a spatula.

The core group of Searles' Homecoming Tailgate Crew has been friends since they came together as roommates in Hanson Hall during their freshman and sophomore years. The crew makes a weekend of each homecoming, starting with golf on Thursday. The crew includes Kenn Picardi ('82), Patty Miller Picardi ('83), Larry Howard ('82), Kevin Norris ('83), Peter Solberg ('81), Kim Leckenby ('83), Philip Cardillo ('82), Rick McCarthy ('82) and Jim Wulff ('83)

"Others join us occasionally," says Searle, "but this is the core group."

After recovering from the last Homecoming tailgate, Mark Searle joined *Montpelier* staff for a Q&A on his "crew."

Do you have any other JMU alumni in your family?

My brother [David Searle] is an alum -- 1978, accounting. My 9-year-old daughter wants to be. We'll see what she thinks (and what JMU Admissions thinks) when she's 17.

How have you kept everyone returning to Homecoming for 22 years?

Good times, good memories, good rental locations for the Homecoming weekends. We rented places in Massanutten for many years and for the last three years have enjoyed the hospitality at the Stonewall Jackson Inn in Harrisonburg). Everyone has been committed to staying in touch, and we have deemed Homecoming weekend sacred to make sure we do so. One of our guys, Pete Solberg, served in Afghanistan this past year; and so this was an extra special Homecoming for him and us.

What's the weekend's game plan?

At the game, our tailgate party is command central and hosted by the Picardis. From there we go to the game, walk around the campus, meet up with other friends and catch up. During the weekend, it's pretty much eat, drink and be merry with some kid activities mixed in like a soccer game, the skateboard park or swimming.

What do you think of this year's football team?

Excellent. One of our tailgaters, Larry Howard, drove up from Atlanta to Chattanooga to see the championship. I got to see the game in a bar in Northern Virginia with a lot of JMU alums and it was great.

What's with the carved JMU pumpkins? Who is the artist and is this a 22-year Homecoming tradition, as well?

Patty Picardi ('83) is the pumpkin artist. Since Homecoming was on Halloween weekend this year, this was unique. But whatever the weekend, Patty always creates a very attractive tailgate party décor.

Favorite memory of The Burg and JMU?

There is no one single favorite memory of the 'Burg and JMU, but one thing that comes to mind is when many in our group participated in the talent show that is produced every year. We had a very big production of the song *Dirty Dog* by Kai Winding. It's a song with big brass and loud guitar. We had lots of dancers and it was a lot of fun preparing for it and participating in the show. We had long since lost the album (yes, as in LP) and Kevin Norris, our director/producer, finally found one on eBay this past year. So we celebrated the return of the Dirty Dogs.

Anything you'd like to add about the weekend?

Great time as always. I know we'll come back for No. 23.

What's the biggest change you've seen in students?

They're getting younger. Actually, I think they look and act like we did -- not a lot of change in the students, just the alums getting older. Of course the change in drinking age since we were [on campus] has had a big impact in campus life and the students, but we'll keep those stories among ourselves.

What's the biggest change you've seen on campus?

I think JMU has done an excellent job of expanding without ruining the great campus life that it's known for. The biggest change to us old folks is simply the cushy lifestyle it appears the students have -- not that we didn't have a pretty good campus life too -- but an on-campus convenience store and a health club is

pretty good living!

What do you think of the new ISAT campus?

I'm not too familiar with the ISAT campus, (just passing through) but from what I've read about it and what I've seen, it is impressive and visionary. It is another attribute that will bring the national recognition JMU deserves.

Do you have a favorite JMU story you'd like to share?

Favorites can't be shared (laughs). Whatever story I might pick would revolve around a party of some type or around an athletics event, a weekend camping trip or a Spring Break trip to Florida. Wouldn't that be true for every alum?

Favorite Homecoming Weekend story you'd like to share?

My favorite Homecoming story is from our student days. I think it was 1981, my brother and his friends and soon-to-be wives (Class of '78) came back for the weekend and stayed at the Belle-Meade Motel. They were so wild and out-of control that I remember my friends and I being relieved to think that there was still fun after leaving JMU. They were of course *really old* -- like 25 or so (laughs). Anyway, not that we're out of control or anything, but our tailgate crew has kept the tradition alive for 22 years.