Living the American Experience.

Helen Russell '85 markets WGBH's “American Experience”

BY PHILLIS HANSON '01

On September 26, 1973, tennis legend Billie Jean King sparked social change when she defeated Bobby Riggs at the Houston Astrodome, before a worldwide audience of 50 million viewers. Helen Russell '85 can tell you exactly where she was during that match, and could probably provide a play-by-play account of the ground-breaking event. Immersed in sports since childhood, Russell combined her passion for athletics with her Assumption education to create a fascinating journey with some historical twists of its own.

Russell’s achievements on the basketball court at Connecticut’s Wamogo Regional High School caught the eye of former Assumption women’s coach Rita Castagna HAY’71, who offered her a partial scholarship to the school. Although Russell initially resisted following in a sibling’s footsteps—her brother, Kern Russell ’80—she accepted the offer, and fell in love with the College. “There was an immediate connection with Assumption that was just so comforting. I was embraced by the school,” she says. “I always wondered what kind of education I'd find. Assumption proved to have everything.”

Shortly after arriving on campus, Russell laced up her Nikes and hit the playing field. Depending on the time of day and season, she could be found smashing tennis balls over the net, shooting hoops on the basketball court, or catching pops flies on the softball field. In the 1984-1985 season, she served as captain of all three teams.

Many students name certain professors as powerful influences during their academic years. Russell added her coaches to the list of role models and memories from her days at Assumption. “My coaches were very much a part of my life there,” she says. “I would call them teachers as much as anything else. As we all know, sports teaches you about everything—how to work as a team and how to focus, as well as a lot of other challenges you face when you graduate.”

In the classroom, Russell sought to enhance her major in English with studies in the communications field. Since no formal Communications major existed at that time, she created one. With the help of Dean John Burke H79 and Dr. Maurice Chase, she took all the media courses Assumption had to offer and filled in the gaps with classes from nearby Worcester State College. She also completed an internship at a Boston television station and an independent study with Coach Joe O’Brien S7.

“Five years later, Russell entered the television world when she snagged an enviable position at Harps Productions in Chicago, producers of “The Oprah Winfrey Show.” There were so many people looking to find work in television,” she says. “I realized that everybody coming out of school was trying to go through the front door of a production company, so I decided to try another door.” After taking a graphic course that enhanced her media repertoire, she wrangled an internship. Five days later, Russell began her stint with the Oprah show. Again, she found herself in the presence of a strong female role model. “It was an incredible opportunity to work for a woman who had such a command with her audience, who was really able to tap into the consciousness of what’s going on in society,” she says.

While working for “Oprah”, Russell continued to pursue her passion for sports as a freelance for HBO Sports. As luck would have it, she covered the most prestigious tennis tournament in the world. “I spent 10 years working for HBO’s coverage of the Championships at Wimbledon. As part of the highlights team, we produced a one-hour show that aired each night in the United States. It was remarkable to witness all that goes into producing an event of that magnitude,” she says. Unfortunately, in 1999, HBO relinquished its contract to cover the event, which ended the gig for Russell.

In 1994, Russell returned to the East Coast and joined the WGBH family. She currently serves as communications and marketing coordinator for “American Experience,” a documentary series that produces programs about historically significant individuals, places, and events. She praise the station, dubbing it “Boston’s own Library of Congress” since programs cover the arts, sciences, history, current events, and politics. Russell says, “WGBH is an amazing production house, producing nearly one-third of all the prime-time programming that appears nationally on PBS. Working in such a creative environment, that excels and continuously produces work that is thought-provoking and insightful, is very stimulating.”

"American Experience,"