

JOE DEFFNER  
2004

Take Exit 14, the Thetford Exit. You'll also see signs for Chelsea, Lyme, New Hampshire and Lake Fairlee. Make a left off of the ramp, cross back over the interstate and proceed to the top of the hill. You'll see a white Congregational Church on your right and the town green will be on your left. That's Thetford Hill. But Joe, "Don't blink, you'll miss it."

The caller on the other end of the phone was giving me directions to Camp Billings. I had answered an ad for a summer camp job at an employment office on a college campus in Ohio and was driving through Thetford for the very first time. I was looking for a change of scenery, maybe a little excitement. And as some of you have heard me say before, when you're from the midwest, it doesn't take much. "Camp Billings on Lake Fairlee." It sounded kind of nice. My orange Chevy Citation, the worst car ever manufactured in the motor city, survived the journey East and delivered me safely up Thetford Hill, past this church and on to Post Mills and the lake. But there was a harrowing moment just beyond the Cross Road where Route 244 turns sharply to the left and a flatlander unfamiliar with these Vermont roads almost missed the turn and came dangerously close to winding up in the fog covered lake.

But I spent that summer and the next few summers at Camp Billings hearing about this mysterious place called the Academy from Larry Drew and Robin Pettingell. Twenty years later, I'm still here. I didn't blink. But what if I had? What would I have missed? Well, I would have missed learning the rich history of the Academy from an 87 year-old historian named Charles Latham. A history of a school started by a man, the Reverend Asa Burton, who stood in this very church and was forward thinking enough to found the Academy as the first coeducational school in the state, primarily because he wanted his daughters to get an education. A school whose reputation was such that Harriet Beecher Stowe, author of Uncle Tom's Cabin, chose to send her son here and about whom President Lincoln once said, "So you're the little lady who started this war." It's a school whose history includes Henry P. Montgomery, an African-American graduate of TA who became a teacher in Thetford, and later, along with his

brother, founded a school system for black children in Washington, D.C.

History, of course, needn't be 50, 100 or 200 years removed from the present to yield valuable lessons. Over the past 15 years I have been blessed to have valuable mentors in this town and at this school. One of them, Barb Sorenson has not only been a mentor to me, but to many of you as well. She along with Robin Pettingell have shown me how to work with all kinds of students and to love coming to school every day. Dell Betts immediately comes to mind as someone who not only taught her students the valuable lessons associated with home economics, but in her retirement, was always available to speak with my classes on any of the wisdom her lifetime of experience has yielded. The apple doesn't fall far from the tree, as the saying goes, and her son Jed taught me more about coaching through his quiet example than I could have learned anywhere else. Mrs. Barrett, our long time librarian, was always available to listen to the ramblings of a novice teacher and on the practical side, to help with any research project. It's not surprising. Mrs. Barrett, like her sister Mrs. Barker come from good stock. They grew up at the Academy watching their father and mother, Carl and Virginia Anderson guide the school through some difficult years following its total destruction by fire in 1942. Because of their efforts, their great granddaughter Rachael sits amongst us, a member of the Class of 2004.

Which brings me to the lessons I have learned from you people over the even more recent history of our past six years together. Think of this as "Everything I needed to know, I learned from my students." I would like to share those lessons now.

From Lila Gendal and Alli Thurston, I have learned a number of things. First, turn off the radio and enjoy good conversation while traveling, even if you do drive 100 miles in the wrong direction and find yourself on the Canadian Border. And second, although I was initially skeptical, global positioning systems in vehicles really are a good thing.

From Eric Bragg, I've learned about creative uses for basement storage spaces. Yes mom and dad, you can have a home hatchery downstairs. He's also confirmed what I already knew. Trout are beautiful fish.

Alida Adams and Chapin Clarke's lesson to me is a simple, but critical one and can be summed up in one word: Vote.

Tyler Braley and Howard Stone taught me that if you don't like your truck, you can always trade it for a newer, louder one. I did just that a couple of years ago, but what I got wasn't necessarily a louder truck, but one with an extended cab for child safety seats.

And speaking of the occupiers of those safety seats, Megan Pluta, Sarah Zack and Lauren Fifield have restored my faith in my own kids when after babysitting they have repeatedly told me that my children aren't the monsters I make them out to be.

Pointing at Andrew Cook, I have also shared this bit of advice with my boys. If you eat right, you may just go from being the shortest kid in your class to one of the tallest.

Every year, I've watched Curtis Marcy and Jeff Fifield built the Founder's Day sled, or float as we call it. Using their ingenuity and some recycled materials they once again built a sled that blew the competition away. In fact, the only year they lost, I think, was in the 7th grade when I was the advisor to the float committee. This year, after the race at school, they illustrated the lesson that your school work and leisure activities can be seamlessly integrated with the aid of a snow machine and Lake Fairlee. Think of it as recycling your school work.

No lesson on recycling would be complete without mentioning Erin Wetherell and Josh

Neirman, who have led the way in reminding all of us to reduce, reuse and recycle.

For some members of this class, the recycling lesson includes clothing and shopping at the Listen Center--where else would Isaac Munro have found that satin white jump suit that he wore on Founder's Day?

Maybe it was actually from the catalogue which some of Isaac's classmates shop from. I believe it's called, "Young, Angry and Poor." Raf, Nick, others?

Maria, Keelyn and Trevor remind me to embrace life and if your name is Josh, take a picture of it! This was especially evident on the Costa Rica Trip, when Maria and Keelyn did their part for international relations, greeting every seemingly random male with an, "Ola!"

But there are advantages to be friendly and polite, and when I think of Jeremy Durkee, I am reminded that when you're polite, a reminder I often need, people notice and extend you the same courtesy.

Part of being polite is laughing and nobody laughs more than Carolyn, even when the joke isn't that funny.

Of course, come to think of it, Sean Shields laughs a fair amount too. And I appreciate Sean because he has taught me one of life's most important lessons--to never take myself too seriously.

In a speech like this, it isn't possible to mention everyone by name and perhaps it's bad form to mention some and not others. But there are three things that I've learned from your class. The first is that chicken wings can be an important part of a balanced diet.

The second can be found in the recommendations I wrote for some of you people. The sentiment, however, applies to all of you. It goes like this: "I was \_\_\_\_\_ seventh grade history teacher. When her (or his) class entered Thetford Academy, the teachers knew that this was an exceptional group--bright, enthusiastic and a lot of fun to teach. We attempted things with this group that we haven't tried since. That's how cooperative they were." It must be true. Why else were your teachers willing to spend an overnight with you at the CCB. We haven't done it since. We were willing to do it because you people actually enjoy each other's company and you accept each other warts and all. When your classmates from Lyme, Strafford, East Corinth and points north joined you in the ninth grade, you welcomed them and made them part of your class. The third lesson I've learned is embodied in each and every one of you by the people sitting behind you. The lesson is now driven home to me each and every day and that is this: Being a good parent matters. You are all a testimony to the most difficult, but most important work that any of you will ever do. Please join me in rising and acknowledging the people who have gotten you this far.

In closing, I would like to extend one lesson in return. The lesson is simple, but not always easy and it goes like this: Find the work you love--whether it's flying a plane, fighting fires or promoting global awareness, in the case of Dan Kelman, Luke Hodgdon and Lela Schlenker, respectively--find something that you care so much about that it never seems like work. In my case, it's teaching.

Like the character of Shoeless Joe Jackson in the movie, Field of Dreams who wants nothing more than to play baseball and says, "I loved this game. I would have played this game for food money." And then, "Hell, I'd have played this game for nothing." But don't get any ideas Ms. Rich.

Find the work you were meant to do and the place you were meant to do it. But remember, "Don't blink, you'll miss it." Thank you.