

BACCALAUREATE 2007 Joel Breakstone, History Teacher

I arrived at Thetford Academy in the fall of 2003, at the same time as this class began their high school careers. As a result, I've had almost every single member of the class as a student at least once, if not two or three times. I've also coached, traveled with, and advised many of them. Over the last four years, in these various contexts, I've learned quite a few things about this place and these students, some of which I would like to share with you.

Four years ago I was looking for a job. I came across an Americorps/VISTA project that placed workers in high schools in Vermont. I spoke to the coordinators of the program and they put me in touch with the principal of one of the potential schools. I called Martha Jane Rich and talked to her about her school and potential responsibilities for a VISTA worker. I finished speaking to her and tried to look up this town that was near Hanover, New Hampshire. As much as I looked, though, I couldn't find Phetford, with a P, anywhere, nor could I locate the Phetford Academy website that she had told me about. When I finally found Thetford, with a T, on the map, it helped explain why the email that I had sent to Martha.Rich@phet.net had bounced back to me.

Having figured out the name of the place, I drove up the first Monday in June. I parked at the bottom of the driveway. The only entrance that I saw was a set of stairs on the lawn leading up to double doors underneath a Thetford Academy sign. I walked up, opened the door and, instead of entering a hallway, I found myself standing in the middle of a group of students doing homework. They were certainly surprised at having a visitor enter through the doors of the library. I was thoroughly confused. Librarian Jane Labun, noting the stranger standing befuddled by the door, kindly directed me to the office. Later, I spoke to Martha Rich. During that conversation I never suspected that three and a half years later I would be wearing her clothes in order to impersonate her for this class's Founders' Day skit. Perhaps that knowledge would have changed my decision to accept a position at the school; nevertheless, I have been at TA ever since.

Once I moved up to Vermont I quickly discovered some of the perks of living and teaching in a small town. For example, on my first Halloween in Thetford a member of the class of 2007 showed up at my apartment in Post Mills with a costume that involved wearing a pair of old underwear on his head. He maintained that he was dressed as an elephant. I thought that would probably be the last time that high school students would be out trick-or-treating. Yet, members of this class have shown up ever since, unfailingly in equally bizarre costumes. They also seem a little confused about the timing of Halloween because several have shown up on my doorstep in the winter, spring and summer asking for candy.

I have also learned lessons about cross-country and track from coaching both. First, many athletes, some of whom are in the audience today, have informed me that asking them to run a 400, once around the track, will either lead to an untimely death or an abrupt, "I quit," ending to their track careers. Second, stopping for food on the way home from meets might be more important to the athletes than the meet itself, despite the fact that some of the benefits of exercising might be negated by consuming large amounts of junk food. Third, gangly freshmen can turn out to be pretty good athletes as seniors, as recent results demonstrate. On that note, it is

also rather convenient to work with a coach who can drive the fire truck for a post-championship escort. Finally, students not on the track or cross-country teams never get tired of yelling, “Run, Joel, run.” It is as though I enter the set of my own version of *Forest Gump* whenever practice begins.

In traveling to Costa Rica with students I found that fist-sized spiders are not welcomed guests in students’ bathrooms – the hysterical shrieking that I heard from the opposite end of the hotel tipped me off. In an effort to remove the eight-legged visitor, we discovered that tarantulas do not enjoy being put in trashcans and can exit them surprisingly quickly. Based on the speed with which we ran away from the hard-charging tarantula, it seems as though enraged spiders might be a good way to get kids to run 400s in track in the future.

As an advisor to the environmental club, I had the pleasure of hearing many of these students’ plans for helping to save the planet. Although a school pig to eat lunch waste never made its way to campus, they did collect every Styrofoam plate used during one day’s lunch in order to create a human figure made from trash. Unfortunately, the half-finished attempt at the educational Styrofoam man only managed to sit in the corner of my classroom for most of the year. To their credit, though, they successfully operated the compost and bottle recycling systems at the school.

In the classroom, these students were usually engaged, worked hard, and asked thoughtful questions. Some of them were also interested in setting up a version of the television show “Pimp My Ride” for my Chevy Lumina. I wasn’t sure how that could be connected to pre-Civil War U.S. history, but they maintained that it was culturally relevant. In addition, after reading The Kite Runner in Perspectives, they managed to create some of the least aerodynamically sound kites ever to have bounced along the ground. No amount of running through ankle-deep mud got them airborne. That was probably best, since the students really wanted to commence kite fighting once the kites were aloft. I wasn’t exactly sure how my co-teacher, Kenny Logan, and I would explain hands cut-up by strings coated in broken glass.

In all, it has been a thoroughly enjoyable experience. These students have studied, competed, performed and grown together. As they move beyond Thetford Academy, I look forward to hearing about future adventures and achievements. I am sure that there will be many of both. Good luck and thank you.